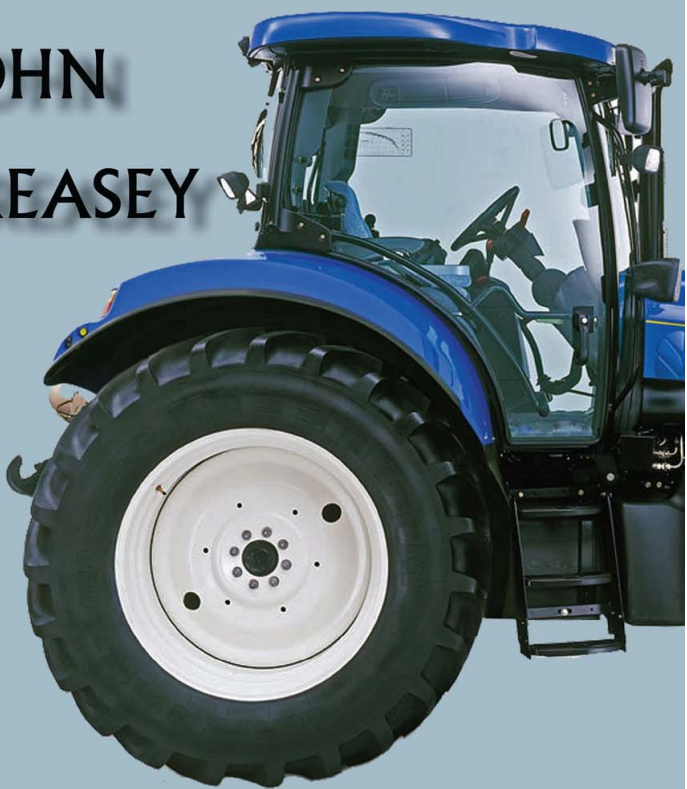
Terror for The Toff

JOHN CREASEY



HOUSE OF STRATUS

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Terror for The Toff

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasy wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

1

FARM FOR SALE

"Of course, what you ought to do is buy a farm," declared Montagu Montmorency Morne. "Think what it would do for you. Fresh eggs and milk every morning, grow your own bacon in your own backyard, all kinds of juicy fruit straight from tree or bush into the consumer's mouth. It's the healthiest occupation ever thought of, and remember what it would do to your income tax."

He paused; and beamed.

"What would it do to my income tax?" inquired the Honourable Richard Rollison, politely.

"Cut it in two, old boy. Halve it. Bound to. Slap all the cost of living down on the expense sheet. Don't tell me you didn't know. Buy the place, put in a manager, run it at a spanking loss, and set the loss against the old income from the family fortune, not to say the staggering fees from the profession, occupation or vocation of detecting. I just can't understand," declared Montagu Montmorency Morne with great solemnity, "why you've never thought of it before."

"I didn't know anybody who had a farm to sell," murmured Rollison.

"My dear old chap, don't be churlish. It's not my farm and you don't know her. She's a pet and she's a peach but she wouldn't pay a penny in commission. I am not in this for what I can get out of it," went on M.M.M. righteously, while striking a pose which was vaguely reminiscent of Napoleon, "but simply in the interests of my friends."

"You forget," said Rollison sententiously, "that London is my home."

"And the old farmhouse could be the home from home," boomed M.M.M., his eyes acquiring a brilliant light. He drew a little closer to Rollison, put his head on one side, and made it obvious that he was now carrying out a strict appraisal. "I knew it," he went on, with great earnestness. "Your eyes are lacklustre. The spark of greatness is fading fast. Your genius is at stake. You need rest, a week or two in the country every other weekend, tramping the meadows and the copses with a gun under your arm and a faithful retriever at your heels. You need to sniff the fresh and wholesome country air, live under the bright blue sky, sleep within the sight and sound of nature, and eat and drink—"

"Fresh milk, fresh eggs and bacon grown in my own backyard."

"You see," said M.M.M. triumphantly. "You admit it."

Rollison chuckled.

"At the very least, you could look the place over," urged M.M.M. "It's only about an hour and a half away from London. I'll drive you."

"Not in a thousand years!"

"But I'm good, safe, and reliable. I passed my test."

"The examiner must have wanted to buy a farm, cheap."

"He wasn't interested in farms," said M.M.M. dreamily, "but I did happen to know that he's looking for a flat, and I mentioned that a friend of mine had one just about where this chap wanted to live. If you can't do a man a good turn once in a while, what is the point in living?" asked M.M.M., now virtuously. "All right, we'll go in your car."

"Why are you so anxious to get me down on the farm?" demanded Rollison.

"My dear old Rolly, I've told you. That dullness in the eye, the pallor of the cheek, the lack of snap in the old reflexes, they're not like you. You need *pep*. The world-renowned Toff mustn't begin to slip, you know. At any moment the greatest investigation of your career might come walking in at that door."

The door opened.

"Coffee, sir," announced Jolly, manservant to the Honourable Richard Rollison. He came sedately into the large room which overlooked the tall, grey, gracious houses of Gresham Terrace, Mayfair, and placed a silver tray with silver coffee pot and cups of Sevres china on a small table between the two armchairs.

"Jolly," said Rollison, "Mr. Morne wants us to buy a farm."

"I'm sure it would be a very nice farm, sir." Jolly was elderly to look at, had a lined face, the appearance of the dyspeptic, and the kindly eyes of a sheepdog whose chasing days were over. He was immaculate in black jacket, grey cravat with a diamond pin, and grey striped trousers. "Will that be all?"

"Not quite. Do we want to buy a farm, by any chance?"

"To tell you the truth, sir," said Jolly, in a neutral voice, "I do not recall that we have discussed the matter since the year nineteen forty-six, when you may recall that we investigated some unconventional behaviour of fowls at a chicken farm." The manservant turned solemnly towards one long, high wall, which was unique not only in London but in the whole wide world. This was the Trophy Wall. Secured to it in a variety of ingenious ways, were souvenirs of the many cases in which Rollison had been involved as chief investigator. This had not always been with the approval of the police.

Montagu Montmorency Morne watched Jolly and the wall as if he was hypnotised. He saw the hangman's rope, against which Jolly brushed, to make it swing with almost ghoulish slowness. He saw the lipstick container which hid poison, the palm-guns, the knives which ranged from carving knife to a genuine Toledo stiletto, the blunt instruments, the tubes of poison, the nylon stockings and the pieces of string – each of these in some way or other a lethal weapon. And he saw the top hat with a bullet hole through the crown and a few of Rollison's hairs stuck to it, actually cut off by the bullet. There were other things, among them a cellophane envelope inside which were a dozen or so brightly-coloured feathers from the neck of a Rhode Island Red.

"I distinctly recall that when we placed this trophy in position, sir, you said that country life no longer attracted you, and that London was the place

for us."

M.M.M. jumped up. That was quite a feat, for he was a plump young man with one real and one aluminium leg. His round, red face was earnest and his blue eyes aglow.

"Now, be fair," he urged. "You can't judge this farm by a chicken farm. They're not in the same field. Given a plot of land, a few half-addled eggs and an incubator, anyone can rear fowls, but I'm talking about a man-size farm. It grows nearly everything from cows to cabbages. The farmhouse is three hundred years old, too, a positive period gem."

"Most attractive, sir, I'm sure," said Jolly, and added to Rollison, "Is there anything else you require?"

"Not now, Jolly."

"Thank you, sir," said Jolly, and retired while Rollison leaned forward to pick up the coffee pot. M.M.M. stared first at Jolly's straight back and then at the closed door, and said in a tone of bewilderment: "It's true, then."

"What's true?"

"That Hollywood offered you ten thousand a year for Jolly."

"Black or white?" asked Rollison.

"Does he change *colour*?" demanded M.M.M., wilfully obtuse, and limped to his chair and dropped into it, took a cup of coffee and two chocolate biscuits, and went on: "I shouldn't really, my waistline's expanding at a rate of one button every two weeks. Rolly, I've been thinking. How is it that a handsome, well-set-up, active, virile, immaculate, wealthy man like you has never married? Don't tell me; I think I can read the reason in your eyes. You have never found the right woman. Plenty of pets for a peccadillo or two, but never one with whom you felt you could share your life. I know the reason. You have been starved of real beauty. All the women you know here live in a kind of half world of their own, a positive *demi-monde de Londres.* Slinky, pale, ersatz beauties, they sleep during the day and creep out of their rabbit warrens by night, taking a cab or a car for fear of breathing in a little faintly fresh air, leaning against bars or dancing with lethargic—"

"Why do you want me to go and see this farm?" asked Rollison, firmly.

"Well, at least I got the message over, I thought you weren't ever going to tumble to it." M.M.M. sipped his coffee, and nibbled another chocolate biscuit. "As a matter of fact, old boy, it's owned by a buddy of mine and his sister. They inherited it as the sole relic of the Selby family fortune. The trouble really began when they tried to sell it. Mind you, I use the word 'trouble' in a strictly limited sense. For you it wouldn't be any trouble at all, but for Alan and Gillian Selby it's a headache. I mean, why should the old Scarecrow want to frighten customers off?"

"Ah," said Rollison, straight-faced. "Does he, then?"

"Positively. And don't get anything wrong, the Selbys are not mean. They've offered the old Scarecrow a cottage, rent free, damned decent of them to my way of thinking, but he won't hear of it. Whenever a prospective buyer goes to look over the place, he casts doubts on the Selbys' rights to the deeds, says there'll be trouble in store for any new owner, because he's

taking it to court, and then he asserts that the place is falling to pieces and the well-water isn't fit to drink and there's no main water yet. He says the plumbing won't plumb and the ceilings are falling down, and at the slightest hint of rain, it comes through the roof at a dozen places. I mean," asked M.M.M. most earnestly, "do you think it's right, old boy?"

"I think they could get him out if they went to law about it."

"He's been tenant of the farm for thirty years, he knew the Selbys' parents well, and when they were young they used to call him Uncle Silas. I mean, when you've called a man Uncle Silas, you can't very well have the law on him, can you? Even if it were on your side. And is it? He has a long lease and pays his rent. He simply won't give up the farm, although he's too old to run it properly."

"Why won't he give it up?"

"That's why I want you to buy the place," said M.M.M. "If you bought it you'd have every right to go down there and investigate. But you'd have to buy it so that you wouldn't be committing trespass, or anything like that. I mean," he added, glancing at the Trophy Wall, "I wouldn't like to encourage you to break the law, old boy. It's going for a mere song."

"Sing it."

"Sixpence."

"Stop fooling."

"I'm serious," asserted M.M.M. "A simple contract to buy, signed over a sixpenny stamp, is all that's needed. Then you would be entitled to look over the place, and within reason do what you liked. Really all you need is something to wave in the Scarecrow's face. I know that these days you're a professional investigator, and if a millionaire wants your services, why shouldn't he pay you a fortune? But this is different. Alan Selby plucked me out of that burning crate; but for him I wouldn't be here to tell the tale. And I know that I have no legal claim on you, but here I shamelessly exert a moral right," went on M.M.M., his smile now a little strained. "I introduced you to Champagne Charlie, and if you didn't get a whacking great fee out of him, it's Jolly's fault. Best I can offer you is a lunch at Chiro's and free milk for the rest of your life if you can prise the Scarecrow away from that farm. I assume you are already supplied with free eggs."

"I'll have the eggs as well," murmured Rollison.

Montagu Montmorency Morne's plump face lit up as if the sun were shining on it, and his blue eyes made him look like a babe in arms.

"You'll do it?"

"I'll go and have a look at the place, anyhow."

"Bless your little nylon socks! Rolly, I don't mind admitting that's a great relief, I didn't think you'd bite. Tell me, did my spiel melt you, or was it my appeal to your stern sense of duty?"

"Neither," answered Rollison promptly.

"Eh?"

"Neither."

"Then what?"

“About six months ago, when you were in hospital, I came to see you,” explained Rollison. “Remember? There was some loose talk that you weren’t going to survive, and I wanted a last look into your blue eyes, so I came along. And coming out of the ward as I reached it was—”

“Oh, no,” groaned M.M.M. “Gillian Selby in the flesh.”

“In point of fact, she was wearing a most attractive suit which looked as if it had come from Paris.” Rollison poured out more coffee, and went on briskly: “Anyone as beautiful as that has to be helped out of trouble.”

“The difficulty with you is your all-seeing eye,” complained M.M.M., with a touch of bitterness. “You’ll probably go down to Selby Farm, take one look at the Scarecrow, and say he won’t get out because he’s haunted by a sixteenth-century witch who tells him he’ll expire if he ever spends a night outside its four walls. When will you go?”

“Let’s have lunch on the way.”

“Rolly,” said Montagu Montmorency Morne, “I don’t know whether you’ve agreed to look at the place because of Gillian’s big eyes, my tin leg, your sense of duty or your sentimental heart, but I’m damned glad you’re going. It’s a peculiar business and the Selbys don’t want to get really rough with Old Smith.”

“Scarecrow Smith?”

“Yes. But there’s some odd business going on down there, that’s certain. Incidentally, the Selbys live at the cottage which they’d turn over to Smith if he’d leave the farmhouse. He has it on an old lease from Gillian Selby’s father. They’re only half-brother, half-sister, same father. Also as background, Gillian’s parents died when Gillian was very young. Alan’s a kind of brother-cum-father. Mind if I give them a tinkle, and say we’ll be there about three o’clock?”

“Go ahead,” said Rollison.

“Thanks.” M.M.M. rose, with that practised nimbleness, and went to the desk and picked up the telephone. It was a large desk, of panelled walnut, and just now very little was on it. Rollison went out of the room as M.M.M. was giving the number, and found Jolly coming from the kitchen.

“It’s a nice afternoon, so I’m going for a drive,” announced Rollison. “Why don’t you go and disport yourself in Hyde Park or the Tower?” As he spoke he raised a warning finger, and then lifted an extension telephone which was just outside the kitchen door. “I’d like to make sure he doesn’t pull a fast one.”

Jolly gave a discreet little smile, and watched him.

Rollison heard the ringing sound, and M.M.M. cough; then he heard the ringing sound stop, and a girl say in an unexpectedly breathless voice: “Alan, is that you?”

“Someone far, far better than your brother Alan,” said M.M.M. “This is Masterful Master Montagu Mont—”

“Monty, don’t fool,” said the girl, still rather breathless; yet she had a most attractive voice. “Alan’s missing.”

“Alan’s what?”

“Missing. I haven’t seen him since last night. He was up when I got up this morning, I didn’t see him go out of the cottage. I thought he’d be back for breakfast, but there’s no sign of him, and now it’s half-past eleven. I can’t believe that he’d go off without a word, something’s happened to him. What do you think I ought to do?”

2

TWO CLIENTS

As she spoke into the telephone, Gillian Selby was looking out of the window. She could see the narrow road which served the cottage, the farm and two other nearby houses, and in the distance the telegraph poles which marked the main road. It was May, that morning there had been rain, and the leaves of trees and hedgerow, bushes and flowers, were green jewels in the bright sun. She could see a wide expanse of garden and meadow, and in the distance, the roof of Selby Farm; the house itself was hidden by a copse of beech. She longed to see Alan come striding along, but no one came walking; although a car turned into the road.

She watched it coming, bright green yet very different in colour from the leaves.

Monty had said: "Hold on a minute," and she knew that he was talking to someone else, for she could hear a murmur of voices. The car was coming nearer. An aeroplane shone like a silver speck and left a white trail behind it.

"Hallo, Gillian, you there?"

"Of course I'm here."

"Well, don't go haring off looking for Alan," said Monty, in the authoritative voice which he could adopt at times, always surprising her. "I'm coming down straight away. Be there soon after one. Hungry."

"You may have to make do with a sandwich."

"You pop something into the oven," insisted Monty. "You don't realise it yet, but you'll be entertaining the next best thing to royalty."

The green car was so near now that Gillian could make out the face of the young man at the wheel, and could see that the car was an M.G. saloon. Some fowls fluttered near the trees which hid the farmhouse, suggesting that Old Smith was out of doors; he always managed to scare them.

"Monty, don't you bring any guests today, the whole place is upside down."

"Be seeing you," said Monty. "Be sure you don't run away, good—oh, hold on a minute." His voice faded, but he soon spoke clearly again. "Try to think of anywhere Alan might have gone, and telephone round to find out if anyone's seen him."

"Monty, you mustn't—"

"Toodle-oo," said Monty Morne, and rang off.

He was infuriating, but that was nothing unusual; Gillian seemed to have spent her life alternatively hating the sight of him, and thinking he was one of the better things of this world. Now, she forgot him. A second car had appeared on the narrow road, travelling much faster than the first. The second one was larger, and black. The green one turned out of sight of the

window, and in a moment would come to a standstill. She was sure that she didn't know the man. She watched the second car with greater anxiety, because it might be the police, and she was seriously worried in case Alan had met with an accident; that seemed the obvious explanation, and it scared her. She heard the door of the green car slam, and heard the engine of the second car roar. A young man came in sight at the window, first glancing in, and then turning and looking round, as if very interested in the people behind him.

Gillian poked her fingers in her hair, took off her plastic apron and hurried with it towards the kitchen, but only just reached the doorway when the telephone bell rang again. *"Damn!"* she exclaimed, and screwed the apron up, flung it into a chair and missed, slammed the door on it, and hurried back to the table where she had been talking to Monty. She was a little flushed, and had no idea how attractive that made her. In fact, she did not know the magic there was in her movements and in her eyes; the kind of magic which could work a spell on young men. It appeared to be doing so on the young man from the green car, who was standing at the window and staring at her without the slightest attempt to conceal his presence or his interest. He looked startled, and his lips were parted. All she really noticed was that he had red hair, which caught a shaft of sunlight and seemed the brightest thing in sight.

She snatched up the receiver. "Hal-*lo!*"

Instead of a reply, she heard the sound of a button being pressed and pennies dropping. The coppery-haired young man no longer goggled, for the black car drew up. Everything happened at once, that idiot Monty was bringing a guest, and she simply couldn't understand what had happened to Alan.

". . nk," went the last coin, and a man said: "Hallo?"

"This is Selby Cottage, please—"

"Is that Miss Selby?"

"Yes, will you *please* hurry, someone's at the door."

"Miss Selby," the man said, "I'm coming to see you in about an hour's time. I'll have a message from your brother. Don't tell anyone that he is missing until I've seen you, or he might get hurt."

It was the last phrase which caught her unawares. One moment she had felt a surge of relief at the promise of a message from Alan; then the warning had followed without meaning very much, until the man said in a clear, clipped voice: "Or he might get hurt."

It was the voice of a man who seemed to mean exactly what he said.

"What do you mean?" she made herself ask quickly. "Who are you? Where's Alan?"

"I'll see you in about an hour," the man repeated, and the line went dead.

Gillian stood with the receiver in her hand, staring at the earpiece as if it were to blame. The coppery-haired young man was out of sight now, but another, shorter, older, darker clad, was passing the window, a determined looking "I-am-important-mind-out-of-my-way" kind of individual. Then

there came a sharp knock at the front door.

Gillian replaced the receiver slowly, but didn't move. She could hear the telephoned words as clearly as if they were being repeated, and they seemed to get inside her, making her feel cold. She shivered, a swift, sharp spasm, then made herself move towards the front door. This opened straight onto the porch and the garden, there was no hall to the cottage. Another door led to a small front room and the stairs to the two bedrooms and the bathroom.

The knock came again.

Gillian said, in a strained voice: "What on earth was he talking about? Why should Alan get hurt?" She neared the door as the caller knocked again, and suddenly she exploded: "All right, I'm coming!" She had completely forgotten Monty and the promised visitor, and could not get the threat out of her mind.

Then she opened the door.

The young man with coppery hair was smiling at her, as charming a smile as she had ever seen. The important looking man was not smiling, he was staring haughtily, and he managed to get his word in first.

"Are you the owner of Selby Farm ?"

She didn't want to talk about the farm, she didn't want to think about anything but Alan. She looked at the young man blankly, knowing that she was behaving oddly, and heard the other add:

"*Are* you Miss Selby?"

"Yes."

"In that case—"

"I'd like to buy your farm," declared the coppery-headed young man, in a voice unexpected in its deep American drawl. "I'm sure you'll agree that first come should be first served."

"Miss Selby, my name is Lodwin," said the other man. "I am authorised on behalf of my principals to offer you the sum of ten thousand pounds for that property and ménage known as Selby Farm, subject to immediate contract, surveyor's approval, freehold purchase and vacant possession."

"I want to buy it for myself," drawled the young man, smiling, "but I couldn't find ten thousand. Not cash, anyhow. I'd gladly fix a mortgage."

"My principal would make settlement against exchange of contract," declared the dark, self-important man. He was pink of face and grey of hair, he had a small mouth and was a little too fat. His suit was dark grey, and he wore a bowler.

"You're going to have to make quite a decision," said the young man. "Miss Selby, my name is—"

"I'm sorry," Gillian interrupted, "but the farm isn't for sale at the moment." As soon as she said it, she realised how foolish 'at the moment' sounded, but that didn't matter; all she wanted to do was to get these men away from here, and give herself time to think.

Because Alan might get hurt.

"But there was an advertisement in the *Westchester Times* only two weeks ago, and Messrs. Dalton, Smeed and Dalton informed me only this morning

that the farm was open to offer," Lodwin protested.

"We forgot to tell them we'd withdrawn it," Gillian said, and then realised that she had a headache, and that she did not quite know what she was doing or saying. Another phrase was beginning to jostle with the one which had hit so hard. ". . . *the sum of ten thousand pounds*." That was at least twice as much as she and Alan had hoped to get, and the significance of that was only now beginning to dawn on her. "How—" she began.

"You can't possibly have a house for sale one moment and not for sale the next," the man said sharply. "Will you kindly—"

"Pardon me, sir," interrupted the coppery-haired young man with a beaming smile; his accent sounded rather overdone. "Didn't you hear what the young lady said? The farm is not for sale, not even for ten thousand pounds cash against the exchange of contracts."

"I don't believe it," snapped the man in grey.

". . . he might get hurt . . . the sum of ten thousand pounds . . . he might . . . ten thousand." It was ludicrous, but Gillian's head was swimming, and her knees felt weak. She knew that she was losing colour, and stretched out a hand for support which wasn't there. The young man seized her wrist and then moved forward and put an arm round her waist.

"Say, what's wrong with you?"

"I don't know," Gillian answered with unexpected clarity, and knew that she would probably have fallen but for his support. "I've a bad headache, I think."

"You've certainly got a bad something," he declared, and moved his other arm suddenly. Before she realised what was happening, he had lifted her clear off her feet and was carrying her into the front room, to the large couch which stood with its back to the window. He seemed to find her no weight at all, and when he lowered her to the couch he did so with great gentleness. "You stay right there," he ordered, "I'll get some water." He seemed to ignore the self-important man, who was gaping from the doorway, and strode straight to the kitchen door and thrust it open. She saw him through a kind of mist. His coppery hair seemed as if it was reflecting shining rays to every corner of the room, picking out the brasses, the copper utensils of an earlier age, the old china, everything. She closed her eyes, heard a rustle of movement, and suddenly felt something cold and clammy on her arm, which made her start and gasp.

By her side, touching her, was the man in the grey suit, and his fingers were as cold as the fins of a fish just out of Arctic water.

"In confidence, I am prepared to raise the offer to twelve thousand pounds," he hissed into her ear.

The young man was splashing water in the kitchen sink. Gillian could hear but not see him. The other was bending over her, and she could feel his breath warm upon her cheek. He whispered again. *The sum of ten thousand pounds, the sum of twelve thousand pounds, or he might get hurt.* It was a kind of nightmare. The cold fingers were stabbing at her, and seemed to threaten death, the hot breath was moist upon her, and the words razor sharp in her

mind. "*Twelve thousand, twelve thousand, twelve thousand pounds.*"

It was a fortune.

Then she heard footsteps, looked round, and saw the coppery-haired young American striding towards her, carrying a cup of water. As he drew close, glaring at the smaller man, he kicked against the edge of the carpet. She would never know whether that was by accident or design. Whatever the truth of that, water shot from the cup into the self-important man's face, and cascaded down his chin.

3

READY TO KILL

The spout of water smothering Lodwin's face did Gillian as much good as if she had swallowed it. She started up on the couch, forgetting weakness, dizziness and confusion. She saw the coppery-haired man pull himself to a standstill as the water dripped off his victim's chin.

Then, the dark-clad man seemed to explode.

He hurled himself at the American, fists clenched and striking out. As suddenly the younger man lowered his hands, as if to protect himself, then began to back away, apparently bewildered by the rain of blows. He was a head taller and looked much more powerful than Lodwin, but in the first few seconds of that hurricane attack it looked as if he was going to be battered to his knees. There was a strained look on his face and in his eyes, too, and Gillian could sense his desperation.

"Stop!" she cried, and scrambled off the couch. "Stop it! Stop it!" She swayed on her feet, but managed to stagger forward. By then Lodwin had the coppery-haired young man with his back against the wall. "*Stop it!*" she screamed.

The coppery-haired young man dodged to one side, out of immediate danger. To get at him, Lodwin swung round, oblivious of Gillian's nearness, and he bumped into her. She staggered to one side, while Lodwin leaped to attack again; but now it was not so easy. The younger man fended him off with a blow on the nose, then seemed to twist his body and writhe closer to his assailant. In a moment they were tangling again, but now she had no doubt who would win.

"If you don't stop it," she cried, "I'll send for the police!"

They ignored her.

She swung round and rushed to the telephone, but as she lifted it, and while she looked over her shoulder, she saw Lodwin rock back on his heels and fall heavily. He lay on his back for a moment, eyelids fluttering, making no attempt to get up. The tall young man was breathing quickly as he looked first at his victim and then at Gillian.

"I'm real sorry about that," he said, and then realised that she was holding the telephone. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm calling the police."

The victor looked flabbergasted, but moved swiftly, reached her side, gently but firmly wrested the telephone from her, and put it down as she heard the operator answer. He kept a hand on her wrist as he looked upon her, shaking his head emphatically.

"We don't want to call the cops for a little private fight," he declared.

"I thought he was going to kill you!"

"Sure, and for a minute I did, too," said the other, "but he thought better

of it, and that gave me time to try to kill him." He let her go, and smiled down at her; he had eyes which crinkled at the corners, and made him look perhaps nearer thirty-five than twenty-five, and his smile was most attractive. "But the fight's finished now. I'm sorry you saw it."

"Why did you spill the water over him?"

"Now, ma'am, don't blame me for that," the tall American protested; "accidents will happen, even to a Texan in England. What was his final offer for the farm?"

Gillian didn't answer.

"Did I hear him say twelve thousand?"

"If you knew, why trouble to ask me?" Gillian felt annoyed, exasperated, and even foolish because she had been so near absolute collapse. Her legs felt weak again, and she longed to sit down. She thought of Alan for the first time since that whirlwind fight; Alan was still absent, and the voice of the man on the telephone seemed very close to her ears again. ". . . *or he might get hurt.*" She remembered everything more vividly, including the warning that she must tell no one that Alan was missing.

"If he offered twelve thousand pounds, or close on thirty-five thousand dollars, he must want that farm building mighty bad," observed the man who claimed to come from Texas.

Gillian backed to a chair and sat down.

"Apparently he isn't the only one."

"No, ma'am, there are the two of us," the coppery-haired young man agreed, and gave his most winning smile. "Well, you're a business woman, and you won't listen to a lower offer, I guess. I'll go to twelve thousand five hundred pounds, but you'll have to wait some weeks for your money, I could give you one thousand pounds as a down payment, and the balance —"

"In a hundred years' time," barked the man on the floor.

He was getting up slowly and watching the Texan warily. His right side of his chin was slightly swollen, and one of his eyes looked puffy, too, but that was the only outward sign of the fight.

"Did I hear you say something?" inquired the Texan, mildly.

"I said you would pay the balance in a hundred years, which, as far as Miss Selby is concerned, means never. I repeat my offer, Miss Selby, and there is no reason why the contract should not be drawn up overnight, in fact this very afternoon. I would pay cash, in full, against your signature. I hope you will be sensible enough to take it."

Twelve thousand pounds in cash?

Gillian didn't speak, but there was the conflict of whispers again.

Twelve thousand pounds . . . or he might get hurt.

"You want to know something," said the Texan. "You fascinate me, Mr. Lodwin. You have the oddest way of making a young lady want to oblige you. You ought to take a correspondence course in how to impress a customer. If I read Miss Selby aright, she wouldn't sell to you even if you piled the twelve thousand pounds up on that table in front of her eyes.

Would you, Miss Selby?"

"I should have to consult my brother before making any decision," Gillian said almost desperately.

"That makes sense," the Texan approved.

"Surely you have authority to make such a decision on your own. The farm is yours, not your half-brother's, isn't it?" Lodwin was even more sharp-voiced than ever; and he also knew the truth.

Gillian disliked him very much. If she had to choose which one of these men to sell to, it would be the Texan every time, except for one thing: ready money. The money would be equally divided between her and Alan, that had always been understood between them, and it would make a fortune for each. Six thousand pounds. But Alan was—

"Where is your brother?" inquired the coppery-haired young man.

"He's out."

"When will he be back?" demanded Lodwin.

"I don't know."

"Come, come, surely you have some idea when he will return?"

The Texan laughed spontaneously.

"I guess the best way I can make sure of getting that farm is to leave you two together for a while. At the end of half an hour I imagine you wouldn't have a chance," he said to Lodwin. "That's exactly what I'll do." He drew nearer Gillian, smiled down on her, and went on: "I forgot to introduce myself, Miss Selby. Just call me Tex, everyone back home does that. I don't want to make a nuisance of myself, but I'm prepared to take a chance that you'll give me an opportunity to buy that farm. Right now I've some other business to attend to, but I'll be back. You can be sure of that."

She didn't know whether she wanted him to go or not. She certainly did not want to be left alone with Lodwin, but beyond that, couldn't really be sure what she did want.

She said: "I should have to wait for my brother before making any decision, so why don't you both come back this afternoon?"

"Suits me, ma'am, suits me fine," the Texan said.

"I see no point in postponing the decision," interposed Lodwin nastily. "Obviously what you really mean is that you want another bid. Very well. I have the contract of sale in my pocket. I have a thousand pounds in cash, and my cheque for fourteen thousand pounds will be met if you make special clearance arrangements before three o'clock this afternoon. You stand to take no risk at all, Miss Selby. Why don't you stop being foolish, and sign?"

He actually took a large envelope out of his pocket. It was badly crumpled at one corner, and a little crumpled everywhere, but somehow had an imposing look. It must have been a very tight fit in his pocket. He unsealed it, and stepped to the table, then shook out the contents. Five pound notes began to fall out, not in ones and twos, but in dozens. They showered upon the table in a little hillock of paper money. The last thing to fall was a folded sheet of paper.

William T. Brandt seemed as fascinated by the cascade of notes as Gillian. When the paper stopped sliding and rustling, each stared as if hypnotised, while Lodwin looked triumphantly into Gillian's face, his expression making it clear that he was certain that she could not hold out any further.

He didn't know the difficulty with Old Smith, Gillian thought.

He couldn't possibly know that the farmhouse was worth no more than five thousand, could he?

"Miss Selby," remarked the Texan, "that's a large sum of money, and I come from a state where they respect money and a good businessman. I guess you're a good businesswoman. If you are, then you'll be asking yourself right now why it is this fat creep is ready to pay you fifteen thousand pounds for property which isn't worth a penny more than ten thousand? I guess there must be some good reason. If you take my advice you'll try to find out what it is before you close any deal with him."

Lodwin now glared at the Texan.

Gillian actually shivered.

That was as much because of the expression in the dark-clad man's eyes as anything. He looked as if he could kill; looked as if he was ready to kill just then. His right hand had moved towards the inside breast pocket of his coat. It stayed there. The Texan watched him steadily, and it was almost as if he was willing him not to thrust his hand further inside the jacket.

The two men seemed to have forgotten Gillian.

Ten minutes ago, they had fought that swift, bitter battle with their fists. Now it seemed as if they were fighting with their eyes and their minds, and that it could be just as deadly. She wished they were a thousand miles from here. That telephone voice intruded again, with everything that it implied. Gillian was completely confused, although she knew that the Texan was right: before she made any decision, she ought to know why these men thought that the farm was of such value.

When she knew that, she might know why these men wanted it.

Then the tension eased.

"I'll be seeing you," the Texan said. "Goodbye for now, ma'am." And then for no reason at all he added: "You bet." He turned and strode to the door and a moment later went outside and he didn't once look back. Gillian stared at the window as he passed; and this time she couldn't see his hair, only the lower part of his face. She heard him striding away, footsteps sharp and clear; then they stopped, and a car door slammed.

"Now perhaps you will be good enough to take the sensible course, and sign this contract of sale," said Lodwin in a thin voice.

He unfolded the document and handed it to her.

The engine of the green M.G. started off.

"And directly you have signed it, I'll give you my cheque for the balance," Lodwin went on.

Gillian didn't read the contract, but looked at him, and asked: "Why do you want the farm so badly?"

"I want it for my principals who wish to buy not only this but other

property in the neighbourhood," said Lodwin, so brusquely that it was easy to believe that it was true. "They are aware, as no doubt that young American is aware, that the value of the land in this vicinity will rise sharply in the near future, because of certain road and town planning developments. You may have read of them in the newspapers. My principals know that these developments will in fact take place. They could have offered you the present market value price for your property and so swindled you. They preferred to give a good offer, so that there would be no recriminations in the future. That is the simple reason, Miss Selby. I will go further. There are others who would like to buy this property for the same reason. In short, my principals and others are competing for it. However, mine are far more dependable, and have much more capital. We will never allow ourselves to be outbid. I may tell you that I was authorised to go up to fifteen thousand pounds without further consultation with my principals, and I think it unlikely that they would be willing to go seriously higher. I think the price a generous one. Your brother is hardly likely to object to such a sale, so—"

He rustled the paper as he held it over the little mountain of notes, and at the same time took a fountain pen from his pocket. It was obvious that he did not seriously think that Gillian would refuse, as obviously he believed that the Texan had left because he knew that there was no hope for him.

And Alan certainly wouldn't complain.

"Allow me to make one further commitment on behalf of my employers," went on Lodwin. "If you receive a better offer than mine in the next forty-eight hours, we will match the offer, and add five hundred pounds to it. I will write that undertaking on the contract. Allow me."

He put the document on the table, and then began to write with a bold, flowing hand, using jet black ink from an old fashioned fountain pen.

He finished, signed the document with a flourish, and handed it to her. At that very moment, a car sounded at the end of this road, the third one in less than an hour. It might be Alan! Gillian pushed the document aside and stepped swiftly to the window. Lodwin followed her, document in hand.

"Were you expecting another caller?" he demanded, sharply.

"No, not yet," she said, and watched a scarlet car streak along, its top showing above the hedge, the thin hedge itself looking as if it were shielding a river of blood. Then she remembered seeing a car exactly like that before. It came into sight, very fast, and for a moment looked as if it was bound to crash into the house. But it didn't. It missed Lodwin's car by an inch, the corner of the cottage by two inches, a rose bed by three inches and the small lawn by about an inch and a half. As it quivered to a standstill, the driving door opened and a tall man climbed out and uncoiled himself; he was startlingly handsome and youthful- looking.

Gillian had seen this man, Rollison, only once before: when she had been to the hospital to see Monty.

She saw Monty now, about to open his door.

She found herself fascinated by Rollison, whom she knew better by his reputation and the soubriquet of the Toff. In a queer way, she felt anxiety

lose its sharpness, as if this man was already shouldering troubles for her.

Then she turned to look at Lodwin.

He was not there.

4

DISAPPEARING TRICK

There was Rollison, already halfway towards the door, and waving to her. There was Monty, out of the car and hurrying as well as he could in the taller man's wake. There were the two cars. But there was no sign of Lodwin, although only a second or two before he had been standing there with the document waiting for Gillian's signature. The pile of money was still there. She went swiftly to the kitchen, but there was no sign of him. She heard the front door open, for she had not locked it, and then Rollison came in, stooping beneath the low lintel of the door, and smiling at her as he greeted: "Sorry we're late. Is he back?"

"Is who—" she began, and then realised whom he meant, and felt appalled because in that very moment she had forgotten that Alan had disappeared. She saw the surprise on Rollison's face at her question, and went on hastily: "No, he isn't, but I hardly know whether I'm on my head or my heels, so much has happened."

"Leave it all to the Toff," boomed M.M.M. from the doorway. Then he inquired, his voice becoming shrill: "What's on? Has it been raining money?"

Gillian said: "I know, I'm absurd, but –well, a man was with me just now, he left it." She stared up at the ceiling, as if wondering whether Lodwin was upstairs. "Now he's vanished."

"What man was this?" asked Rollison.

"The Johnny of the car?" asked M.M.M.

"Yes," answered Gillian. "He – oh, it's a fantastic story! I don't know where to begin, except that – well, he was *here*. By the window. He wanted me to sign a deed of sale, and offered this as a deposit. Then he saw you, and vanished. I didn't hear a sound," she added, aware of M.M.M.'s puzzled glance, and the way Rollison was looking, as if he was trying to read her thoughts.

Then they heard the whine of a self-starter.

On the instant, Rollison swung round.

Men had moved swiftly in this cottage today, but none so swiftly as he moved now. M.M.M. was just behind him, and tried hastily to get out of his way, but failed. They collided. M.M.M. fell back, Rollison lost his balance, and the engine of the car outside roared. Rollison regained his balance, and leaped towards the window, which was open a few inches. He flung it open wide and climbed through, before M.M.M. had picked himself up. The sound of the engine became much louder, and reached a high-powered whine as Rollison disappeared.

"That man is greased lightning itself," said M.M.M. ruefully. "Let me give you a piece of advice, Gill. Never get in his way. Wouldn't surprise me if

he's caught the disappearing Johnny up, and jumped over the top of the car by now."

Gillian didn't speak.

"Here, I say," said M.M.M. "You look all in, you'd better take it easy." He limped towards her, while she stared at the window, listening to the car and the sound of running footsteps.

At that moment, Rollison knew that there was no hope of catching the other car. Before he could turn his own round and reach the main road, the first would be several miles away, and might take any one of four different roads. He watched as the car disappeared, listened as the engine faded, as if he hoped to remember the sound, and then bent down and examined the gravel path. There were several wet places where the gravel had worn away, and only dirt was left. Sharply defined in one of these was a tyre mark. He studied this as the girl came hurrying out of the cottage.

In a moment, everything about him seemed to change.

Except for her pallor, this girl was really lovely. One would have to travel a long way to see her equal, and obviously she did not realise just how lovely she was, or how gracefully she moved. The over-critical might have said that she was a little plump, but that was hardly true, and she had a wondrous small waist and a beauteous bosom. Behind her, limping very badly, was Montagu Montmorency Morne.

"Hallo, Gillian," Rollison greeted, as if they were lifelong friends, and to prove it, took her hands in his, drew her to him, and kissed her lightly on the lips. She was so astonished that she didn't back away. He kissed her again, squeezed her, and went on with magnificent ease: "Now don't worry a bit, we'll find your brother. That's if he doesn't come back of his own accord," he added cheerfully. "Is there any news at all?"

"It's been ludicrous," Gillian announced, and added with a catch in her breath: "And frightening, too. I've never been so scared, and never been so worried."

"No need to worry now," declared M.M.M. "I'm here, and if that isn't enough, the Toff has agreed to give the investigation priority. Believe it or not, he clipped thirty-five minutes off my pre-amputation time for getting here from London, a hairsbreadth under fifty-nine minutes. I was quite sure that after the inevitable accident, I'd lose my other leg and a pair of arms."

It was obvious that he was being cheerful and bright for the sake of it. Rollison wasn't sure that these were the right tactics now, for the girl looked quite as worried as she said she was. The essential thing was to get her to talk, and Rollison did not want to lose any time.

"What's made it so worrying?" he asked, and his hand was gripping her forearm firmly; encouragingly. "News of Alan?"

"In a way."

"Bad?"

"A man said," Gillian began, paused as if she didn't know how to continue, and then suddenly began to talk as if she would never be able to

stop. The whole story poured out of her as they stood there in the sunlight and amid the silence, with M.M.M. leaning against the front door and Rollison looking into Gillian's beautiful eyes, made radiant by her eagerness to make sure that he understood everything. He did; she even managed to make him understand what a temptation it had been to sign on the dotted line, and accept Lodwin's offer.

As the story progressed, M.M.M.'s smile faded, and he looked both bewildered and baffled. When she had finished he looked from her to Rollison and back again, as if quite speechless. When he did manage to speak, it was gustily.

"You mean *three* different people want the farm?" His voice squeaked. "They must be crazy!"

"Three people if the man who telephoned wants it," agreed Gillian. "He didn't actually say so, just said that I mustn't tell anyone that Alan was missing until he'd been to see me. He ought to be here soon," she added, and looked along the road.

"He'll come, sooner or later," said Rollison, "but probably not if Monty and I are still here. He'll watch the cottage and try to catch you on your own."

"Sixth-sighted Sammy says so," said M.M.M., weakly. "What on earth do you make of all this, Rolly?"

"I don't know yet, but I've got round to wondering if Mr. Smith of the farm knows anything, and whether his knowledge explains why he doesn't want to give up possession," Rollison said thoughtfully. "The puzzling factor about the story you first told me was that Old Smith should be so difficult to move. I wondered what his real motive was, and it's beginning to look as if there is a good one."

"We'd better tackle him, pronto," said M.M.M.

"All in good time," demurred Rollison. "We've a number of other things to do first. This man who ran away, Gillian – what did he say his name was?"

"Lodwin."

"I don't think I know anyone named Lodwin," Rollison mused, and slid an arm round Gillian's waist and led the way to the door. M.M.M. went ahead of them, now moving more uprightly, as if his leg hurt less. "Yet he must have run away because he was afraid of too many people seeing him. What was he like?"

They entered the front room.

"Well, medium height, and rather pale, with sharp features, I suppose." Gillian frowned. "It's rather difficult to describe him, he was really rather neutral. He had pale grey eyes and I suppose they impressed me most, he looked as if he was so used to getting his own way that if I refused, he'd cheerfully kill me."

She shuddered.

"He won't," declared M.M.M.

"He won't even have a chance," said Rollison, and hoped that wouldn't

prove an empty boast. “Did he have any distinguishing mark – a mole, scar, moustache, anything like that?”

“I can’t think of any.”

“Kind of face that gets lost in a crowd,” put in M.M.M. with obvious regret. “Dark clothes and a bowler could mean that he was really a solicitor, but would a solicitor behave like that?”

“Shouldn’t think so,” said Rollison. “All we really know about him is his height, his taste in clothes, and the fact that his Austin car was a black saloon and had new *Everlast* tyres.”

“*What?*” M.M.M. sounded incredulous.

“They made a clear mark on the drive,” said Rollison offhandedly. “They’re not the most common tyres and would be easier to trace than most. Anyone with him, Gillian?”

“No.”

“What about this other chap, Tex the Texan ?”

“All I know is that I liked him, and that for some reason he suddenly decided to go off on his own. I didn’t understand it at the time, unless he knew that he hadn’t enough money to outbid Lodwin, and wanted to go and try to arrange to get more.”

“Nice head on those pretty shoulders,” M.M.M. said. “What did I tell you? But don’t you go falling in love at first sight with a handsome young Yank. I’m leader in the field.”

Gillian was almost tart.

“Don’t talk nonsense about falling in love with a stranger.”

“Sorry, pet.”

She flared up.

“You might show that you’re a *little* worried about Alan! No one has given a thought to him yet.”

“Oh, yes, many thoughts,” Rollison assured her, “and among them the fact that the telephone threatener said that he would be here soon, and that he probably won’t come if he thinks you have company. Think you could bear to be left alone for a while?”

Gillian said dubiously: “If I have to be.”

“Not the slightest reason why she should,” said M.M.M. “We could hide.”

“If this chap is watching the cottage, he’ll know we’re here, and will wait until we go away before coming to tell Gillian what he wants,” reasoned Rollison, “and we want to know. We’ll leave, Monty, but we won’t go far. There’s a pub in the village. We’ll arrive as if for lunch, and go inside. Then I’ll nip out the back way, and cut across country to the cottage. It won’t take half an hour, and the chap probably won’t come until he feels sure that we’re safely tucking into our luncheon. All right, Gillian?”

Obviously she was eager, even anxious, to trust Rollison.

“Yes, of course. What am I to say to him, when he does come?”

“At first, you must refuse to listen to anything he has to say, whether it’s a threat or bribery, or whatever he thinks up. Just say you won’t agree to anything until your brother’s returned, and if this man of the telephone

really knows where he is, then you're going to tell the police. Take your time leading up to that," Rollison went on, "and take it from me that I'll be back within twenty-five minutes of leaving here. That'll be at twelve forty-nine," he declared, looking at his watch. "Don't worry, Gillian."

"I'll try not to."

"Fine. And put that money in a safe place, he might find it a big temptation."

Rollison squeezed her arm, and turned as if to go, with obvious reluctance. M.M.M. was frowning, which was most unusual for him.

Then Rollison turned from the door, and asked swiftly: "Have you any idea at all why Old Smith won't move out of the farmhouse?"

"None at all," said Gillian.

"Any idea why these people want the farm so desperately?"

"Of course I haven't."

"Not calling the lassie a liar, Rolly, are you?" asked M.M.M. in a tarter voice than usual.

"She could know the reason without realising it," said Rollison. "That's what I'm trying to find out."

But he had been testing the girl, and trying to make sure that she was telling the truth. He believed that she was, and also believed that she was badly frightened.

Was it safe to leave her, even for half an hour?

5

SPEED THE TOFF

Obviously, M.M.M. did not think it a good idea to leave Gillian alone, but he did not say so. As obviously, Gillian was reluctant to stay by herself, but saw the force of Rollison's plan, and almost bustled them out of the front door. She showed no sign that she had been annoyed by Rollison's questions; but M.M.M. still seemed resentful. Rollison went ahead to the scarlet car, opened one door for M.M.M., and then took the driving wheel. Gillian stood in the doorway for a moment, and Rollison looked at her, seeing the background of the old red brick building with its huge oak beams, and the background of trees, meadows, and a corner of Selby Farm, just visible from here.

The girl waved, and went inside.

M.M.M. levered himself into the car.

"I hope you're right," he said. "If anything happens to her while we're gone, I'll have your head for it."

"And welcome," said Rollison, as if it did not occur to him that the other man was ruffled. "You don't often come across 'em as brave as they're beautiful. But she's as safe as houses."

"You seemed to argue by guesswork."

"Just simple logic," declared Rollison. "At least two people want this farm badly and only she can sell it to them. If she were to die, there would be a lot of fending and proving and probating, and it would take months before anyone could buy the farm. So Gillian isn't in physical danger at the moment, although she might come under a lot of pressure. And it looks," went on Rollison, shooting the car forward so that a crash seemed inevitable, "as if one of the pressures is through brother Alan."

"How?"

"When this mysterious man of the telephone visits Gillian, I expect him to offer Alan's living *corpus* in exchange for the deeds of the farm."

"Good lord!" gasped M.M.M.

"Which seems to make three people all very anxious to get it, as we said before, and if we add Old Smith, who's in a splendid bargaining position, we have four people to tackle. Any one ought to be able to tell us the reason for it all." Rollison drove the car along the narrow road at bewildering speed, yet came to a standstill smoothly at the road junction. Then he swung into the main road and tore off again. M.M.M. sat looking at him and occasionally glancing nervously at the road. They passed a farmhouse, a mile from the cottage, then came in sight of the tiny village, with the pub, the Wheatsheaf, in the middle of it. At the thirty-mile-an-hour sign, Rollison slowed down, and no timid woman driver could have turned more gently towards the pub's parking place.

By now, M.M.M. was smiling.

"Three minutes seventeen seconds," he commented. "You're the only man I know faster than I used to drive."

"When you've learned to use your piece of automation, you'll be passing me in the first lap," Rollison said. He was already out of the car. "I'm going to grab half a pint and a pork pie, but you'd better have a leisurely lunch, and make it look as if you're staying." He glanced at three other cars in the drive-in, and added thoughtfully: "Incidentally, the telephone chap might own one of these. If anyone leaves within a few minutes of us going inside, that may be the man we're after."

"Could be," conceded M.M.M. "I'm glad I brought you, after all."

He grinned.

They went in. The saloon bar was low-ceilinged and old fashioned, with uneven wooden flooring covered with sawdust, oak beams, brasses round the walls. The bar itself was higher than most, and a man and a woman stood behind it. Two men, obviously local, were standing at one end, one man by himself stood at the other, eating a pork pie and drinking from a pewter tankard.

He looked a city type, with his immaculate suit and his snow-white shirt and neat grey tie. He took no outward notice of the newcomers, and Rollison did no more than glance at him as he led the way to the bar. It wasn't surprising that the woman, youngish and buxom and with a pleasant face, greeted Montagu Montmorency Morne with a delighted smile and a warm handshake.

"Why, Mr. Morne, we haven't seen you for months, not since that awful accident you had. We were ever so sorry to hear about it, weren't we, Bert ?"

Bert, who was twice her age, agreed with: "Ah."

"And I said from the beginning, nothing was going to keep you on your back for long, didn't I, Bert?"

"Ah," said Bert.

"And when I heard you'd lost a leg I said you'd learn to use a n'artificial one quicker than most people learned with real ones after a long illness. Didn't I, Bert?"

"What's it to be?" asked Bert, who looked as if he had grown from seed in one of the nearby fields, his face was so darkly weathered and his hair so much like wind-withered corn.

"Two pints of your 3 XXX," said M.M.M., "and how's lunch today? Got any steak and kidney pudding?"

"No luck, duck," said Mildred. "Steak pie do?"

"Next best thing. Does the cooking herself, Mildred does," M.M.M. confided, and then nudged Rollison, for the city type at the other end of the bar was gulping at the remains of his pie, and showing obvious signs of haste. He washed the pie down with a long draught of beer, then turned towards the door.

"Good-day, sir," said Mildred.

He nodded.

"'Day," conceded Bert.

The city type hardly nodded goodbye, but went outside. M.M.M.'s elbow became as a thorn in Rollison's flesh, but Rollison sipped his beer as if testing its quality, and looked back into Mildred's bold blue eyes. Mildred in her brash, bright way was quite a piece of homework.

Outside, a car started up.

Rollison snapped his fingers, and looked ludicrously dismayed.

"Monty, I'm half-witted," he declared. "I left my wallet back at the cottage. Remember I took it out for that card? I put it down while I scribbled, and—"

"It'll be there for a hundred years," Mildred said. "You needn't worry."

"Sorry," said Rollison, "I couldn't enjoy your steak pie if I had that on my mind. I'd better have a snack, and nip back. Almost as quick across the fields, isn't it?" he asked, and then picked up a pork pie and bit into it. It was so luscious that the jelly spilled out, and he dodged back, to keep it off his tie. "Mmm*mmmm,"* he said, and finished his beer. "Now I know why you said this was the place for food, Monty. I'm coming back. Can you manage to drive the car?"

"I will not be insulted," said M.M.M. with dignity.

Rollison went out by a door and a passage leading to the yard. He could see the trees which ringed Selby Farm, but neither the cottage nor the buildings from here. He hurried across the inn yard, climbed a fence, and went as fast as hillocks and molehills would allow him, casting a glance towards the road as he did so. He saw a car making its way, reflecting the sun brightly, and was not surprised when it turned off towards the farm.

"There's the city type," he mused, and slackened pace a little, for it was warm and he was perspiring, and it would not help if he twisted his ankle. In his simple way, he was happy this morning. Here was mystery not marred by tragedy, a pretty girl in need of help, and Montagu Montmorency Morne, who probably did not know it but needed a course of therapeutic treatment, for he had not really conditioned himself to the fact that he had lost a leg. M.M.M. was far from his usual sunny self; he had to fight for his self control and his high spirits.

"This might see him through," Rollison mused.

Slowing down, for him, he made speed which surprised a man and a boy who were spreading muck over a meadow. He vaulted a five-barred gate, and was then near enough to the cottage to hear the engine of the car; and to notice the moment when it stopped. He was perhaps half a mile away, and he could not see the car. Now, he ran along the side of the field, which was fairly firm and much flatter than the one behind him, until he reached a spot where he could see beyond the trees to the cottage, the farmhouse, the city type's black Humber car and the city type himself. He was at the front door, which was not yet open. Rollison took cover behind the trees again, was aware that the man and boy were watching him, but did not pay them the same compliment.

Next time he looked, the door was closed again, and the man was out of sight.

Unlike the man who called himself Lodwin, the city type had not turned the car round for an immediate getaway, and Rollison gave a contented smile when he noticed this. He went to the back of the cottage, to approach through the kitchen, the way that Lodwin had disappeared. He stepped over a low beech hedge which divided the garden from a meadow, and reached the back door in a matter of seconds.

It was not locked.

He stepped inside, making no sound.

He heard Gillian say in an angry voice: “If you don’t let him come home at once, I’ll send for the police.”

“That wouldn’t do you or Alan any good,” said the city type; and he sounded more like a city slicker. There was an overtone of Oxford and an undertone of Cockney in his voice, and that exasperating air of absolute confidence which had ended many a friendship. “You’ve got to be reasonable, my dear, you don’t know how much trouble your brother’s in.”

Gillian didn’t answer.

“You see,” went on the city slicker, “all you have to do is listen to Charlie, and everything will work out all right. You are the legal owner of Selby Farm, and only you can sell it. The market price is four thousand five hundred, and here is an agreement to buy for five thousand. I can’t say fairer than that. Why, it’s a positive bargain.”

Paper rustled.

“Nothing in this world would make me sign that,” said Gillian, tensely.

There was a kind of mocking laughter in the voice of the man who called himself Charlie.

“Come again,” he said. “If you’re obstinate, I’ll reduce the offer by five hundred pounds. Charlie knows how to handle a job like this.”

“I’ve been offered fifteen thousand pounds this morning!”

“I daresay you have, but I’m offering you five thousand plus your precious brother.”

“You’d never dare to hurt him.”

“Wouldn’t I?” asked the man called Charlie, and a different, dangerous note sounded in his voice. “Don’t make any mistake, Gillian my pet. Your Alan would get hurt, and so would you if it were necessary. Now stop arguing, and sign that contract. Then you only have to sit back for a week or two, until the deeds have changed hands. After that your precious brother will come back as good as ever.”

Rollison was now very near the door. He could hear Gillian’s breathing, and knew that she was very agitated. He peered inside the room, and saw Charlie’s profile. Charlie was a good-looking man in the middle-forties, with a very thin mouth, the lips set tightly at this moment, and his eyes narrowed and commanding. They stood by the table, and a document lay on it.

Charlie thrust a fountain pen into Gillian’s hand.

“Sign,” he ordered.

Gillian took the pen.

Charlie's lips relaxed a little, and there was a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. For a moment, he looked almost likeable.

Then Gillian hurtled the pen at the open window, and missed the opening; it cracked against a pane of glass. She snatched up the document and ripped it across, and when Charlie grabbed her wrist, she freed herself and slapped him across the face so heavily that he staggered to one side. She backed swiftly towards the fireplace, and Rollison was overjoyed to see her bend down and pick up a long brass poker. She didn't spoil it by threatening Charlie, just stood with the poker in her hand, defying him.

Rollison could see the man better, now.

He no longer looked likeable; he looked devilish. His eyes were narrowed so that all Rollison could see were silvery slits, and his lips were set tightly together, his nostrils were nipped.

"You—little—bitch," he said, slowly and viciously at the same time. "You and your brother will wish you'd never been born before this is over. Go and pick up the pen."

"Get out of this house," ordered Gillian.

"Go and pick up the pen," Charlie repeated, and put his right hand to his pocket. He drew out another document, and went on: "I brought a duplicate, in case you went all temperamental, but don't go temperamental on me again. *Pick up that pen.*"

Rollison was ready to move on the instant, but kept back, hoping that Charlie might give something away while he thought that only the girl was here.

Gillian did not move, and her grip on the poker seemed to tighten. She did not speak, and her gaze was unwavering. Rollison had the impression that she meant to reserve all her strength and all her will-power for a supreme effort when this man tried to get the poker away.

Obviously she was sure that he would try; as obviously she was right.

He took a step forward, putting his right hand in his pocket. He drew out an automatic, and came towards her menacingly. This was the precise moment for Rollison to intervene; Gillian could not last much longer by herself.

Rollison was about to step forward when a man spoke from the front of the house in a rich American accent.

"Hi, there. Having yourself a good time?" he inquired brightly.

6

TEX AND CHARLIE

So much happened so swiftly that any man but the Toff would probably have missed some of it, but he missed nothing at all. There was the Texan at the window, Charlie swivelling round with the automatic, Gillian screaming: "*Mind his gun!*" and Charlie, firing. But before his finger squeezed the trigger, Tex had vanished, and the bullet winged into the sunlit air, soon lost to sound.

That was Gillian's moment of greatness.

She leaped forward and struck at Charlie's gun. She was far too nervous and missed by a yard, but the attempt gave the Texan time to thrust the door open and come in again; Rollison's eyes glowed at his speed and efficiency. Charlie had a chance to fire once more, but only wasted his bullet in the floorboards; and next moment he was lying on his back, and his gun was in Tex's hand.

"No movie heroine could have done that better," applauded Tex. Rollison saw that he was tall and good-looking, and realised that he spoke with that slow drawl which was only partly assumed; his smile suggested that he was the calmest man in the world. "Did he hurt you, honey?"

"No, I'm all right."

"Next time you have a fight with a man with a gun, do whatever he tells you; you can always undo it afterwards," said Tex. "This makes three people who want Selby Farm mighty bad, you ought to be able to get yourself quite a pile of money for it."

"I just don't understand any of it," Gillian said, and her voice was a little unsteady. "I think I ought to sit down."

"Don't be surprised if you don't feel so good," the Texan reassured her. "That could happen to a lot of people. You've gotten a lot on your mind." He watched Gillian sit down, then turned towards the city type, who was trying to get up while watching the Texan with a mixture of fury and fear. "I don't like the way you treated this lady," Tex declared gravely. "I'm going to teach you better manners."

"Keep away from me!" Charlie scrambled to his feet.

"And while I'm teaching you manners, I'm going to ask you where Mr. Selby is," Tex went on. "It had better be the right place, because after that I'm going to look for him."

"*Keep away!*"

Now Rollison leaned against the wall, able to see all he needed to see without being seen himself. It was a change and a pleasure to watch his work done for him, and he admired the slick way in which the American moved; this man had confidence above everything else. Gillian, sitting out of sight, was breathing heavily; Rollison knew she would not miss a great deal.

Charlie darted to one side.

Tex slipped the gun into his pocket, and grabbed the man.

Gillian screamed, for there was a flash as a knife appeared in Charlie's hand. On the instant, Rollison's automatic appeared in his, but even before that Tex had moved his tall, lithe body, there was a swift struggle, and the knife went flying towards a corner and clattered to the floor. As it curved its arc Charlie fell back under a series of swift, savage blows, and had no time to defend himself or even to shout or cry. He thumped against the wall, and there was terror in his eyes.

Tex stepped back.

"If it wasn't for the lady's presence, I'd finish the job on you," he said, drawling more than ever.

Gillian appeared, and stood by his side, sideways to Rollison. Unexpectedly, Tex's hand moved and took hers; and they stood hand-in-hand looking at Charlie, whose right eye was beginning to close, whose lips were split, and whose city clothes were not immaculate any longer.

"Where's Mr. Selby?" Tex asked, conversationally.

Charlie didn't answer.

"I don't want to hurt you again," said Tex, and then corrected himself. "Not while Gillian's present, I mean. But I will if you won't answer. Where is Selby?"

"He—he—he's in Brighton, 51, Norton Street. It's a boarding house. He's not hurt." Charlie couldn't get the words out fast enough, once he had decided to talk. "Don't tell anyone who told you, they'll kill me!"

"What number of what street ?" demanded Tex.

"51, Norton Street, Brighton."

"Thanks a million," drawled Tex, and went on in a way which made Rollison think that he was smiling: "Why do you want to buy this farm so badly?"

Now terror flared in Charlie's eyes.

"I don't know."

"Come again."

"I tell you I don't know. I was told what to do, told how to handle it, I don't know why."

"You'd better find out why pretty fast."

"It's no use trying to make me tell you, I don't know why," denied Charlie, and he almost sobbed; it was a pathetic and degrading thing that a man could break down so completely. "Alan Selby was taken to 51, Norton Street, Brighton, that's all I can tell you. That's *everything."*

"You'll find out why, brother," said Tex, and released the girl's hand and stepped forward.

"*I don't know why!"* Charlie gasped.

"Someone knows, I guess. Who is it?" When Charlie did not answer, partly because he was shivering so much, Tex drew within arm's reach of him, gun in his right hand again, left fist clenched. "Who told you what to do, friend?"

"I—I—I—" began Charlie.

Tex's fingers closed round his throat, as if gently; but undoubtedly there was much more pressure than there looked.

Charlie was sweating so much that beads of moisture were actually rolling down his face.

"I don't know his real name. We call him Mr. Brown, he was at Norton Street this morning! Don't choke me, don't choke me. I can't tell you another thing."

Rollison believed him. If Tex went any further, it would be his first mistake. Tex didn't move his hand for a while, but kept the other at arm's length, while terror seemed to flare up even more vividly in the craven bully's eyes. Then with a swift movement, Tex released his neck, clenched his fist, and struck him beneath the jaw. Rollison had never seen a swifter knock-out, for Charlie's eyes rolled as he collapsed.

Gillian gasped.

"It's okay, honey," soothed Tex, "I've only put him to sleep, so we can handle him better. We don't want him to get to 51, Norton Street, Brighton before us, do we? And we don't want him to telephone information that we're on the way. That's if you want to come along to Brighton with me. I could go alone, I guess, and release your brother Alan." He was looking down at Gillian, his calm eyes were laughing, his teeth showing very white and his expression gay. "When I've done that, you'll just have to sell the farm to me, won't you?"

Gillian didn't answer.

Tex still smiled.

"Honey," he said, "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. How about fixing us a sandwich, while I fix this guy? There's a stool shed outside where he can stay for a while—or maybe there's a room without windows upstairs."

"There—there's a box-room," Gillian told him huskily. She didn't move. "I don't know what I would have done without you. I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you."

"Just sell me the farm for fifteen thousand pounds," said Tex. "I went to the telephone and arranged to step up my offer. That's all the thanks I want." He hesitated, and as he looked at her, his expression changed. "At least, that's all I thought I wanted, but I could change my mind. Did anyone tell you how beautiful you are?"

Gillian said, still huskily: "I'll get those sandwiches," and turned away. But she quickly looked back. "We can go in your car to Brighton, can't we?"

"You bet," said Tex, as if that was the thing he wanted to hear more than anything else in the world.

Suddenly, Gillian exclaimed: "Oh, it's crazy! I don't even know your name."

"William T. Brandt, of Dallas, Texas," the American answered promptly. "Hence the Tex. I'll see you," he added, and smiled with obvious delight.

Gillian was on the way to the kitchen.

There was no way of judging what she meant to do, or whether she would be prepared to go to Brighton with the American. More likely, she expected him, Rollison, to appear at any moment; Gillian had already proved that she had a head on her shoulders.

Rollison backed into the kitchen, and stood behind the door. Gillian hurried in, and something she was wearing rustled. She made a bee-line for the back door, and Rollison then felt sure that she was going to look for him. She glanced out and up and down the garden, and he stepped after her, whispering: "Don't shout, Gillian, but I'm here."

She started, and caught her breath, but didn't shout. She turned to look at Rollison almost wildly, and then closed her eyes, as if giving thanks that he was with her.

He moved so that he couldn't be seen if Tex looked towards the door.

"I heard the lot," he said, in a whisper.

"What shall I *do*?"

"Go with Tex to Norton Street," Rollison told her, "and then insist on going to the Palace Pier head. Is that clear?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"Fine," said Rollison. "Don't tell Tex that—"

She seized his hand.

"After everything he's done, I can't let anything happen to him," she said fiercely. "You won't harm him, will you?"

"Not unless you change your mind," promised Rollison. "All I want to do is make sure that he doesn't harm you."

"Oh, he won't do that!"

"*Hush!"* hissed Rollison, and as he did so, thought: "I wonder."

Whether Tex the Texan would harm Gillian or not, he had certainly made a conquest.

Rollison went to the inner door again, glanced in, and saw Tex on one knee; he appeared to be tying Charlie's wrists. Here was a man who had done this kind of thing so often before that it seemed like second nature. Rollison turned away, and went outside.

It was remarkable but true that he felt quite sure that Gillian would do exactly what he had told her to. Now his problem was to decide whether it was safe to go to 51, Norton Street ahead of her. He had told M.M.M. that she was in no physical danger, because only she could sell the farm; that was almost certainly true. And the American had made no bones about admitting that he wanted to ingratiate himself, so that he could have the farm.

The reason for the flare of interest in it could be found out later.

"I'll take a chance," decided Rollison, "although Monty will probably hate me for it."

He went across the garden and over the fields, waved and called good-day to the man and boy who were still spreading muck, and knew that each stopped to stare at him. Less than an hour after he had left, he reached the

Wheatsheaf Inn. He did not go in the back way, and was not surprised to see M.M.M. standing by the side of the scarlet car, trying to look pleasant but undoubtedly feeling worked up and explosive.

"What happened?" he burst out.

"That's a long story," said Rollison. "Let me tell you in the car."

"We're not going anywhere without Gillian," M.M.M. said, fiercely.

"She's coming," Rollison said mildly, "and I promise you that she'll be as right as rain."

"I want to know what happened, and I won't step into the car until you've told me," said M.M.M., who had a reputation for being as stubborn as any two-legged mule. He thrust his chin out and his eyes narrowed, and he looked rather like a musical-comedy lieutenant about to challenge the colonel to a duel.

"All right, old chap," said Rollison, "it won't take a jiffy." For obviously M.M.M. had to be humoured. "The city slicker type who left here went to see her. He offered her five thousand pounds, and Alan . . ."

The telling of the story took two minutes, but only one of these was outside the car, for M.M.M. started to get in immediately Rollison began to talk. His left leg was the artificial one, and he had some difficulty in getting it into any car, as Rollison knew well; the thing to do was allow him to fight that battle for himself. He tugged and cursed – and then suddenly winced and leaned back, all his colour gone.

Rollison had the engine turning;.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"You get cracking," said M.M.M., and his lips set clamped together between each word. "Just rubbed the old stump a bit. Soon be all right. I thought you wanted to get to Brighton before that blasted Yank."

He closed his door.

Rollison started off, but did not go at top speed, for M.M.M. would find it difficult to brace himself if it were necessary to brake; so he had to be very careful. He sat back, breathing hard, while Rollison looked in the driving mirror, expecting to see the American's car at any moment.

They had been travelling for twenty minutes, and were half way to Brighton, when M.M.M. said: "Sorry, Rolly, I've got to get this leg unstrapped. Done some damage, I'm afraid. Any hospital would do, or a doctor, at a pinch. Hellish sorry." He winced. "How about stopping at the next telephone and getting me a cab ? Then you can get moving again."

"Of course," said Rollison, promptly.

It was while they were outside a telephone box in a nearby village that Gillian and the Texan flashed past in the green M.G.

7

51, NORTON STREET

"You leave me here and get after 'em," said M.M.M. fiercely. "I'll be all right."

"Five minutes won't make any difference," Rollison argued. "You sit there until the cab comes along." He wasn't sure that a taxi would be what M.M.M. wanted; an ambulance would probably be nearer the mark. But the other man had refused to hear of that, and the woman at the corner shop where the telephone was, had assured them that the promised taxi was a large one. It came within five minutes, vintage, large and lumbering, and Rollison helped M.M.M. into it, while an elderly and sad-looking driver watched.

"Now you get cracking," M.M.M. urged. "If anything happens to Gillian —"

"Nothing will," Rollison assured him, but he was already on his way to his own car.

He persuaded himself that nothing could happen to Gillian, but could understand M.M.M.'s doubts. He had wanted to be at Norton Street well ahead of her and Tex, because they might run into a hot reception: therein lay the greatest danger. So he put his foot down and scorched along, taking the turns perilously until he reached the main London road; soon, he was on the outskirts of Brighton. He stopped at a sub post-office, asking for Norton Street, and was told that it was one which led off the promenade, not very far from the town centre. So finding it should offer no problem, he headed for the Aquarium and the Palace Pier. The sun brought out its worshippers in thousands, but the promenade and the beach were not crowded as Brighton knew crowds, and it was easy to drive along. He kept a sharp look out, and saw Norton Street, had good room to park the car near the promenade, and was soon striding towards Number 51.

The green M.G. was outside; at least he wasn't too late.

There was no sign of the Texan or of Gillian.

Rollison's heart began to beat much faster than usual, because of the fear that the girl might have run right into trouble, and he had not arrived in time to make sure that she had not. He could picture M.M.M.'s tense, scared face; M.M.M. was really on edge. Well, anyone would be. He reached the house, which was only two storeys high, freshly painted, and had a signboard reading: *Bed and Breakfast,* with a small sign near it saying: *No Vacancies.* It was just one of hundreds of similar bed and breakfast houses in the district, as far as one could see from the outside.

Rollison tried the front door; and it opened.

He stepped inside a gloomy hall, listening intently for any sound, and heard nothing at first. He went to the staircase, immediately opposite the

front door, and then heard what sounded like a muted voice. Two doors near him stood open, and the first thing to catch his eye was an open drawer at a writing-desk. A warning flared in his mind: that was the kind of thing he might find after a hurried departure. He strode to the kitchen. There was the lunch-time washing-up still on the draining-board, and the refrigerator door was open; another indication of haste.

He went back to the stairs, and heard muted voices again.

He could call out, but preferred to make sure that this was Gillian and the Texan. His heart still beat fast as he went up the stairs. He thought it was an American voice, but couldn't be sure. There was a wide landing, a short passage leading off it, and altogether, five doors. Three of these were open.

Then he heard Gillian say: "What are we going to do?" "Now that's a question," the Texan said.

"It can't have been—" she began, and then broke off.

They were speaking in whispers, and obviously they were scared; Gillian much more so than she had been. But it wasn't grief, there was nothing to suggest that she had found Alan, hurt.

"Of course your brother didn't do it," the Texan said.

Gillian made no answer.

"Even if he had," the Texan went on, "it would be self-defence, and that's not culpable homicide." He said this with such deliberation that he puzzled Rollison, who now peered in through the crack at the door hinges.

The tall American had heard him, and was coming to see who it was.

Rollison pushed the door open, catching the man unawares. He caught a glimpse of a small, sunlit room, Gillian close to the single bed, and lying on the bed, the figure of a man in dark grey. A bowler hat lay on the floor by the side of the bed.

Then Tex the Texan hid all this from view. He was broad as well as tall, and filled the doorway. The sunlight made his coppery-coloured hair seem much brighter. Gillian was just behind him now, and neither of them spoke, but the Texan raised a hand in a kind of pow-pow greeting. Even standing level with Rollison, who was over six feet, he was inches taller.

"Hi," he said. "Are you this guy they call the Toff?"

"Yes," said Gillian, hurriedly.

"Where's your brother?" asked Rollison, as if he had not yet seen the dark-clad man on the bed.

"He's not here," the Texan answered carefully.

"But I understood—" Rollison was playing this foolish.

"I know what you thought, Gillian told me you were coming," said the Texan, "and I thought exactly the same thing. But when we arrived, he wasn't here."

"Who was?" inquired Rollison.

Gillian glanced up at the tall young man. They looked very young and handsome, and there was not likely to be a better matched couple anywhere. But Gillian was scared.

"You'd better come and see," invited the Texan, and turned round. "Just

for the record, I came up here first, Gillian was minutes after me." He was really saying: "Suspect me if you like, but not Gillian." "Gillian, will you go and watch the street, and warn us if the police show up?"

"I suppose I'd better," Gillian said, and passed Rollison, hesitated, and then went out.

"It was one hell of a shock," the Texan continued. "We just walked in the way you did, and it seemed like the house was empty. I came upstairs, and this is what I found."

He stood aside.

Rollison stepped forward swiftly, and felt for the pulse of the man in grey; it was quite still. He had not really needed telling that the man was dead, of a knife wound in the breast. The knife wasn't there. Blood was on the snowy white shirt and even on the charcoal coloured lapels of the coat. His face was very pale and his eyes limply closed. It looked as if he had fallen on to the bed after the blow, and toppled backwards, and that someone had lifted his lifeless legs up.

"They don't come any deader," the Texan declared.

"Do you know him?" asked Rollison.

"In a kind of way."

"What kind of way?"

"He was the guy who offered fifteen thousand pounds for the farm, and left a thousand pounds in cash on the table," said the Texan, and gave a smile which was almost pathetic. "He said his name was Lodwin, and he breathed plenty of threats and menaces."

"Ah," said Rollison. "I see."

"You bet your life," said the Texan, gustily. "I had a quarrel with this guy, and then I came here and found him. Now my finger-prints are all over the place, and the guy has only been dead for a matter of minutes. I just had time to kill him. I could imagine a case for saying that I had a motive, because we both wanted to buy that farm." He smiled again, very wryly. "How well do you know the cops around here?"

"Well enough to know they like to catch murderers."

"I wasn't being funny," the Texan said. "Do I have to run, or would it be better to tell them what happened? Either way I'll be in trouble, and I'd like to know which is the lighter load of it."

"Give me five minutes to make up my mind." Rollison looked round. "Any sign of Alan Selby?"

"Sure. His handkerchief, some of the cigarettes he smokes, and a box of matches which Gillian says he collected from the larder yesterday morning."

"Is she positive?"

"She ought to know."

"Yes," conceded Rollison, and stared at the dead man. "In this room?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"In my pocket."

"You really want to make trouble for yourself, don't you?"

The Texan was smiling more naturally now, and for a moment laughter glinted in his eyes.

"You could put it another way: I don't want to make trouble for Gillian."

"Do you know her that well?"

"So well," drawled the Texan, "that I think I want to marry her. But I don't see that it figures right now. Her brother was here. Maybe he got involved in a fight, but I don't think so. I think he was held captive here, and that his captors killed this guy, and left the articles for the cops to find. That way, it would look as if Selby was the killer. That way, they would have a tighter hold on him and on Gillian, to make them sell the farm. Of course, I could be wrong."

"But it doesn't often happen," murmured Rollison.

This time, the Texan laughed aloud.

"You bet it doesn't!"

Rollison said: "As far as we know, Alan Selby was a prisoner. If he was a prisoner, he probably couldn't have killed Lodwin. The police will be much more interested in you."

"You always take that long to reach an opinion?" Now the smile was only lurking in the Texan's eyes.

"Always," said Rollison, solemnly. "I've reached another."

"Let me tell you what it is: the police will be after me as soon as they know I've been here, and a tall American with an M.G. car and red hair won't be very hard to trace. I've about one chance in ten million to stay free long enough to find out what's going on around here."

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On who helps you. I might. You could stay in hiding at my flat in London, and I could work to find out the real killer."

"How do I earn your help?" The Texan seemed serious, even anxious. But that might be pretence; he was smart and he was clever.

"As one professional to another, just a little bartered information," said Rollison.

"Professional what?"

"Private eye, private richard, shamus or what-have-you?" murmured Rollison, and didn't even let his eyes flicker.

But the Texan grinned.

"I guess you're better when you get warmed up. I didn't know you were professional."

"Usually I like to be paid for my trouble. This time is an exception."

"You want to know why I want to buy Selby Farm?"

"We could work well together," approved Rollison.

"But I guess we're not going to," the Texan responded, "because you aren't going to be satisfied with my reasons, Mr. Rollison. I work for a man in New York. He hired me last week to come over here and buy Selby Farm. He knew there might be competition, or he wouldn't have hired me. He didn't tell me more than that. I was paid five thousand dollars in advance,

and all my expenses, including first class on the *United States* one way and the *Queen Elizabeth* the other, so I didn't argue. Sure, I expected trouble, and I've got it."

"His name?" asked Rollison.

Slowly, the Texan shook his head.

"I just can't tell you his name, because that was a condition of the contract. You wouldn't want me to break a contract, even a verbal one, would you? I can ask his permission to give you his name, but I don't know that he will agree. So I can't pay a fortune in the way of fees for your help. I hate to see any of that five grand disappear, but I'd rather not be held on a murder rap."

He could be telling the truth.

He could be telling a taller story than any that had ever come out of Texas.

Before Rollison spoke, while they stood there within hand's reach of the murdered man, and with tension between them, there was an exclamation from Gillian, and suddenly she came hurrying. When she reached the doorway, she looked as scared as if she had seen another corpse.

"A police car has just stopped outside," she said.

8

TOFF ALONE

If she had known the American all her life and been passionately in love with him, she could not have looked more terrified for him than she did now. And for the first time, Tex Brandt was uneasy; it would not be true to say that his confidence was shattered, but he lost a little of it, and his look at Rollison was almost appealing.

"Back home, I'd know how to handle this situation," he declared. "How would you handle it here, Mr. Rollison?"

"I believe the expression is 'take a powder'," Rollison said politely.

"Don't stand there talking!" Gillian almost shouted, for car doors were slamming outside, and even in this room they could hear the hurrying footsteps of several men.

The Texan's eyes lit up.

"Do I go on my own?"

"Yes. I'll look after Gillian." As if by sleight of hand, Rollison took a card from his pocket, and slipped it into the lean, browned hand. "That's my London address. Go straight there and when you see my man, tell him I asked you to wait. I'll try to telephone to warn him."

"Mr. Rollison, one day I'll find a way of paying you back," the American said fervently. He took Gillian's arm and squeezed, and then turned and hurried out of the room.

"But he'll run straight into the arms of the police," Gillian said, hopelessly.

The police were now inside the house, walking and talking noisily.

"If he does, he's no shamus, and it won't matter what happens to him," Rollison said. "Now you've got to be more feminine than you've ever been, Gillian. We came here because Charlie told us where to come. We shall tell the police everything, except that we leave Tex out of the reckoning – I tackled Charlie, I tied him up, I frightened him into talking. Be slightly hysterical. You are terrified because of Alan, you can't think where he is, you must find him. Swoon a bit, if needs be. And don't take any notice of what I say."

Men were running up the stairs.

"Yes," Gillian said. "I mean, no."

"Good girl! Now walk out. You're pale enough to have seen a ghost. When they start to ask you questions, just look blank. Don't talk until you have to."

Men were on the landing.

"All right," said Gillian, and she could not have been more pale, but she hurried out. Rollison stood looking out of the window of this back room, and was not surprised to see the Texan climbing over a wall a couple of

hundred yards away; the sun was bright on his hair.

The police saw Gillian, barked questions, and were soon taken aback. Then two of them came hurrying, and Rollison met them in the doorway. He did not look pale, but was very thoughtful. They started to speak, and then saw the body on the bed. One of the men, stocky and very broad, moved swiftly to it, then pulled up short. The other stood in the doorway, as if he thought that Rollison might want to escape.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Looking for a missing man, and that isn't the one," said Rollison, and smiled grimly. "You chaps will make the Yard green with envy if you go on like this; he can't have been dead more than half an hour."

The man by the bed turned round.

"That's about right. How long have you been here?"

"A quarter of an hour."

"He might have been dead for fourteen minutes," the man said aggressively. He looked so massive that he was hardly believable, and had a very strong face. The other, in the doorway, was taller and thinner. Outside, someone was questioning Gillian but obviously hadn't got a word out of her.

"But he was dead when I arrived," asserted Rollison earnestly, and flicked his fingers. A card appeared in it, identical with the one which he had given to the Texan. He did not hold it out so that his address showed, but the reverse side; and on this was a little pencilled sketch, of a top hat, a monocle, a cigarette in a holder, and a bow tie; in fact it was like a man without a face.

As the massive man looked at it, his aggression and suspicion seemed to fade, and his mouth actually opened in his astonishment.

"Are you *Rollison*?"

The man in the doorway exclaimed: "I wondered where I'd seen you before, sir."

It was an excellent thing, thought the Toff, to have a reputation which could work such a miracle as that.

He told the story in a downstairs room, with Gillian leaning back in an armchair, her eyes closed, and a policeman watching over her somewhat anxiously; she was the kind of woman about whom all good men were anxious. The story was generally true, except that the Texan was left out of all the reckoning. By the time it was over, the massive man, Detective Inspector Bishop of the Brighton Criminal Investigation Department, was apparently satisfied. His men were upstairs, taking photographs and measurements and going all over the room and the house for finger-prints, and they would find the Texan's; that was something to worry about later.

"How did you get here so fast?" Rollison asked. "Did you get a squeak?"

"A man telephoned and said there was a body here," answered Bishop. "How right he was! Did anyone know you were on the way?"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"It looks as if you'd be framed."

“I couldn’t have put it more neatly myself,” said Rollison, fervently. “The timing was pretty good, and you’re very good to take me on trust. I’m worried about Miss Selby, and I’m also worried about her brother. Think you’ve got enough cause to put a call out for him?”

“Ample. Can you give us a description?”

“*I* can,” said Gillian, opening her eyes unexpectedly. “He’s six feet tall, has crinkly fair hair parted on the right, a snub nose, blue eyes, a short upper lip, which makes it look as if he’s always going to break into a smile. He’s very thin, he only weighs nine stone thirteen pounds, and he’s got a big red birthmark under his right knee.”

Bishop almost burst out laughing.

“Perfect! Do you know what clothes he was wearing?”

“An old brown sports jacket with dark leather edges at the cuffs and patches at the elbow,” Gillian answered, “and a pair of new worsted flannel trousers, brown brogue shoes, rather old, and pink socks.”

“*Pink* socks?”

“Pink socks.”

“I suppose you know. How soon can we get a photograph?” asked Bishop.

“Well, the best one he’s ever had was taken when he was walking along the prom at Brighton last year, by the *Echo.* He had his picture in the newspaper the same night. I expect they’ll have a copy of the photo.”

“If we can’t get one from the *Echo,* we’ll get one from you,” Bishop said. “Can we leave Miss Selby to you, Mr. Rollison?”

“Yes, gladly.”

“Where can we get in touch with you?”

“I’ll be at Selby Cottage, or else let you know where I’m off to,” Rollison promised.

“Thanks very much,” said Bishop, as if that were indeed a favour. “Is there anything we can do for you?”

“You can tell me where to get a meal,” said Gillian, almost plaintively. “I’ve a splitting headache, and I’m sure it’s partly because I’m famished. I know I probably shouldn’t think of food just now, but I can’t help it.” She stood up, and it was obvious from her glittering eyes that her head ached very badly indeed. “You will find my brother, won’t you?”

“Just as soon as we can,” promised Bishop. “And we’ll be along to try to find out what this sudden interest in the farm is about. There’s this man, whom you say is named Lodwin, and the other would-be buyer you know as Charlie.”

“That’s right,” Rollison said, firmly.

“If two people want that farm, and one’s prepared to do murder,” Bishop began, and then broke into a broad smile. “But you won’t need me to add up two and two to make four! Thank you for your help. Morgan!” he called a detective officer. “Take Mr. Rollison and Miss Selby to the Ocean Cafe, they’ll get a good meal there. Then see them home.”

What he meant, Rollison knew, was: “Then follow them home.”

Detective Inspector Bishop might be affable and even obliging, but he

didn't intend to let Rollison out of sight until he had checked on his story.

"Feel better?" Rollison asked Gillian, an hour later.

They were sitting in the front of his car, and he was starting the engine. The policeman, Morgan, was near them in another car: he was going to follow them, he had explained simply, so as to make sure that they ran into no more trouble.

"I'm much better," Gillian answered, "but I feel almost like a ghoul, eating like that when Alan's missing."

"No one said that he was starving," Rollison observed. "The one essential thing now is to keep your head and tell the same story every time."

"I won't panic," Gillian assured him. "I've worked that out of my system."

"I really believe you have." It was easy to admire her matter-of-factness.

"But it could soon come back," Gillian went on. "For instance, what are we going to do with that man in the box-room? Aren't the police likely to want to look round the cottage?"

"If the man's still there when we get back I shall be surprised," Rollison said. "That kind of individual doesn't travel alone. He'll have been released by now."

"I don't know whether to hope you're right or not," said Gillian, and so proved again that she could be remarkably dispassionate, even under pressure. "He might have been able to tell us a lot more."

"I doubt it, Tex the Texan milked him pretty well," said Rollison. "What is Tex's other name?"

"William Brand, or Brandt," answered Gillian, "and there's an initial in the middle."

"William Tex Brandt will do," Rollison said, and drove in silence for fifteen minutes or so, until they were out of Brighton. It was nearly half-past three, and surprisingly warm. The cloudless sky gave the impression that rain could never fall out of it, but the spring flowers were beautiful in the parks and the private gardens, and a gentle wind made them nod. On the open road, Rollison put his foot down harder, and was within a few miles of the spot where he had left M.M.M. when Gillian burst out: "But where's *Monty*?"

"He had a bit of bother with the straps of his leg, and had to rest," Rollison told her, and not for the first time wondered how Montagu Montmorency Morne was getting on. "He'll probably be waiting for us when we get to the cottage." He drove again in silence for a few minutes, glancing now and again at the girl; she had a quite remarkable profile, and didn't really seem quite true. He had never noticed before how her lashes swept round, so that they nearly touched her cheek.

"Gillian," he said abruptly.

"Yes?"

"Have you the slightest idea why this sudden interest is being shown in the farm?"

He stared at the road ahead, while she turned to look at him; when she

spoke, it was very firmly indeed.

"I have no idea at all, and I'm sure Alan hasn't. It's a complete mystery. I would like you to believe that, and to stop doubting me."

"Okay, honey," said Rollison, and sparked an exclamation from her.

Then Gillian asked: "Do you think Tex will get to your flat safely ?"

"I can't think why not," said Rollison. "That's if he wants to."

"Of course he wants to, don't be ridiculous. By the way," added Gillian, and Rollison saw that she was looking at him very intently indeed, "what *is* a shamus?"

"Slang for a private dick or private detective," Rollison told her promptly. "You heard as much as I did, Gillian. We want to find out who Tex's employer is, and Charlie's employer, and it wouldn't surprise me if we want to find who was employing Lodwin, too."

"If they'd kill one person, they'd kill another, wouldn't they?" Gillian said, speculatively.

"We'll find Alan, and we'll find him alive," Rollison assured her quietly.

They did not speak again until they were at the cottage; the first noticeable thing was that the black Humber, which Charlie had come in, was gone.

"So he did get away," Gillian said, as if not sure whether to be pleased or sorry.

The front door was open, and it seemed obvious that no one had been there since they had left it. Rollison left the car in a position to leave again in a hurry if there were any need, and then went upstairs to see the man named Charlie. He had been quite serious when he had said that he expected to find the man gone, and was whistling under his breath when he reached the tiny landing.

Gillian was coming up the narrow stairs.

"It's the second door on the right," she said. "I wonder if you're right."

The door was ajar, and that suggested to Rollison that Charlie had flown. He pushed it wider and stepped inside, and then discovered that this was one of his bad guesses. Charlie had not driven off in that Humber. Charlie was lying on a little camp bed, as dead as a man could be; he had been stabbed in exactly the same place as Lodwin.

9

THE FARM

"What is it?" Gillian asked, in a strangely calm voice; it was as if she had a premonition, or as if she understood instinctively what made Rollison stop so abruptly. She was just behind him. Outside there was the sound of a car, approaching slowly; that would be the man whom Bishop had sent to follow them.

Rollison turned round. There was no point in trying to conceal anything, no point in trying to soften any blow. This girl had taken tremendous punishment in a few hours, and now his impression was that she had steeled herself to take yet more. He could see beyond the immediate fear, to her fear for her missing Alan. For if men could kill so slickly and cruelly as the killer of Lodwin and Charlie, then there was no telling where they would stop.

"Victim number two," Rollison said. "Go down and ask that policeman to come up, will you?"

She flinched; and there was anguish in her eyes.

"Who is it?"

"Charlie."

"The devils," she said, in a quivering voice. "The devils." She didn't sway, didn't close her eyes, didn't look as if she was going to collapse, but she lost all her colour, even her lips were pale.

"Go and bring the policeman, will you?" If she had something to do, it would help.

She didn't answer, but turned on her heel, moving very quickly, as if blindly.

Rollison stepped to the body on the bed. Charlie's face was quite relaxed, all terror smoothed away. But there he lay, as the American had left him, bound to the bed at waist and ankles, and with his wrists bound, too. That was how he had been lying when someone had come into this room and driven the knife to his heart.

Rollison felt the chill of horror; and of hatred for whoever had done this thing.

He looked out of the small window, so tiny that no one could have climbed out. He saw the trees which protected Selby Farm, and the roof of the farm itself. A man who looked as if he were very old came in sight, and a dog trotted after him. The man disappeared.

Was that Smith?

Did Smith know the secret of Selby Farm?

There were heavy, hurried footsteps on the stairs and the landing, and then Bishop's man came in, a thirty-ish, fair-haired, eager Detective Sergeant Keen, dressed in navy blue, looking a little outgrown in it; an overgrown

schoolboy of a man. But there was nothing school-boyish in the way he looked at dead Charlie; except for a tightening at the lips, he showed no sign of the impact at all.

"Did you find him like this ?"

"Yes."

Keen went forward, felt the dead man's pulse, lifted an eyelid, did all the things he should do to make sure that no doctor could help. Then he looked about the room, and said in a man's deep voice: "We must leave this room at once, sir. I shall have to telephone for a team, I expect Mr. Bishop will come out himself. This is just inside our area."

Rollison nodded.

"And this was the man you saw here?"

"How deeply would lies involve him?"

"Yes. I tied him to the bed."

Keen took that well.

"How long ago?"

"About two o'clock."

"He can't have been dead more than an hour," said Keen, and was suddenly less sure of himself.

"I was in Brighton an hour ago," Rollison murmured.

"Yes, I know. Who else knew that this man was tied to the bed?"

"Miss Selby."

"No one else?"

"No one else whom I know about."

"Fair enough," Keen said, but he gave the impression that the shock was now catching up with him, and that he was really a little out of his depths. He closed the door, handling it with great care, took out a handkerchief and, still using great care, turned the key in the lock. There seemed a sharp note of finality in the click.

Then the telephone bell rang.

Keen looked up, as if in surprise, then stepped out towards the head of the stairs, a pace ahead of Rollison. They heard Gillian say "Hallo." They hurried down the stairs, and at the foot Keen turned left, into the living room. Rollison could see over his shoulder. Gillian was standing by the table with the telephone at her ear. She looked round at them. It was as if death was talking to her, and he had never seen a woman with less colour in her cheeks.

She said: "Yes, goodbye."

Keen was sweeping across towards her, hand outstretched as if he would like to take the receiver before she replaced it; but he hadn't a chance. It seemed to Rollison that Gillian made sure of that, and then stood almost defensively in front of the telephone.

"Who was that?" demanded Keen, roughly.

"A friend of mine."

"What friend?"

"Just a friend," said Gillian, and turned away. Keen stood in his new-

found arrogance, but he could not find the right thing to say.

Rollison moved past him towards the girl, and before Keen spoke, he said: "Have you any close friends near here, Gillian?"

"No," answered Gillian, drably.

"No one who could come and stay with you for a bit, or with whom you could stay?"

"No."

"Where have you some friends?"

"Only in London."

"Who would come and stay with you?"

She said as if with an effort: "Monty's sister might. I don't know. Who would want to, after this?" She looked drearily out of the window, and all the life had been drained out of her, partly by the succession of shocks – and partly by what had been said on the telephone, Rollison imagined. "I don't even know if I can stay here." She began to shiver, and that didn't surprise Rollison. "Why don't you find Alan? Everything will be all right if you'd only find Alan."

"We're doing everything we can," Rollison said, and was all too aware of the futility of the words.

"Well," Gillian retorted, "it isn't much."

Keen came across, took up the telephone, and called his headquarters; once routine was needed, he was a man again. He was never likely to be good enough to take responsibility, Rollison thought. Keen didn't greatly matter, except that he would probably be fairly easy to handle.

He put the receiver down.

"They'll be out within forty minutes," he said, "and a patrol car will be here before then. You're asked to stay here, Mr. Rollison. And you, Miss." He looked dubiously at Gillian.

"Where else would I go?" asked Gillian, in that new, helpless way.

"We'll stay close by," promised Rollison. "Miss Selby ought to get some air, sergeant. We'll stroll across to the farm, if that's all right with you."

Keen obviously wished they wouldn't, but decided not to stop them. Perhaps he thought it better to let them go, and have them followed. Gillian was prepared to do whatever Rollison wanted. They went out the back way. It was beautiful in the garden, with the meadows and the woods beyond, and much warmer than it had been during the morning. The sky was clear, and the birds were busy and noisy, and insects were humming and hovering. Halfway down the garden was a fork, dug into the freshly turned earth. Rollison saw Gillian's eyes flood with tears.

"Alan's?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Did he often leave a fork in the ground overnight?"

"Yes, I was always telling him about it."

"Very fond of him, Gillian?"

"He's been mother and father and brother to me," she said, heavily. "He's fifteen years older than I am, you see. Oh, God, I can't stand it if anything

happens to him!"

It was useless to say: "It won't," for more empty comfort now would make real comfort impossible later; and it might be desperately needed.

They went towards the end of the garden and to a small gate which opened onto a field; beyond was the farm itself. It looked as if it had been standing there for four hundred years, and would stay for another four hundred. It was low and snug and picturesque, with its mullioned windows, its gables, its lichen-covered tiles and its red brick with the great oak beams in it. Here was a little of England's past, with the smoke of the present curling lazily out of a squat round chimney.

"Gillian," Rollison asked, "who was on the telephone?"

"A friend."

"You needn't lie to me."

She didn't look at him.

"I'm not lying to you."

"It wasn't a friend. It was another threat to Alan, wasn't it?"

"It was a friend."

"If you don't tell me everything, how can I help?"

"How can you *help*?" she echoed, and turned to glare at him, her eyes flashing, colour storming back in her cheeks, as if anger was the stimulant that she needed. "You've let two men be murdered, you haven't done a thing to find Alan, you haven't done anything at all. Why, Tex Brandt did twice as much as you in half the time!"

"Did he telephone?"

"No!"

"Who was it, Gillian?"

"It was a friend from the village, she wanted me to go and sit in for her tonight. I told her I couldn't." The lie, if it was a lie, came out very pat; but Rollison felt sure that it was untrue. "Now don't keep pestering me, you might just as well go home."

"Soon," he said. "I want to see Tex, too. Who telephoned you, and what did he say?"

"I've told you, it's no use pestering me," Gillian cried. "I'm not going to tell you another thing!"

She turned and half ran back to the house. Detective Sergeant Keen stood by the window, giving Rollison the impression that he was glad she was on the way back, and probably maliciously pleased that Rollison had obviously not got far with the girl. Rollison watched her disappear into the kitchen, and then he walked on, briskly. The girl was worked up to the highest possible pitch of tension and hardly responsible for what she said; but he wasn't any more pleased with himself than she was. It was not that he had done so little, for he had not been here more than three and a half hours; it was because he could not be sure that he had done any of the right things. He had allowed Charlie to stay here unguarded, and so was indirectly responsible for the man's death; that was the most unpleasant thought. True, Charlie hadn't been one of the most lovable of men, but he did not

necessarily deserve to die.

He might have been very informative, too.

And Rollison was not sure that he had been right to allow the Texan to leave. Brandt might go to the Mayfair flat, but he could be roaming around. He might even be near here. He could have killed Charlie, and if it came to that, he could have killed Lodwin, for he had been upstairs in the Brighton house first, and Lodwin certainly hadn't been dead very long.

Rollison reached some wooden outhouses.

Here was the smell of the farmyard, rich, ripe and earthy. Here was a muddled, unkempt farm, with a dirty yard, a few dry-looking heaps of manure, only one of them steaming slightly, a dozen fowls, pecking and scratching, a pig roaming. The walls of the barn and other outbuildings wanted renewing, repairing wouldn't do much good; and the whole place had an appearance of decay. Even the farmhouse itself lost much of its picturesqueness because he was too close; the walls wanted painting, the oak beams looked as if they were rotting, too many of the little leaded panes of glass were cracked, too many tiles were broken. Hens clucked, flies were already swarming. In a nearby field a heifer plodded past.

Then Rollison stood to one side and peered through a window into a low-ceilinged room. He saw several wrapped hams hanging from rafters, and the bright fire in the huge fireplace. But for that brightness the room looked dark and dingy, but it was not the appearance of the room which caught and held Rollison's interest.

A man who looked very old indeed was standing by the fireplace, fingers clasped round a poker much as Gillian's had been, and shaking the poker in a kind of threat at a man whom Rollison could not see.

Rollison moved his position, to see better.

It was Montagu Montmorency Morne.

10

QUICK MOVES

The window was open, so that Rollison could hear M.M.M.'s heavy breathing, as well as the frail voice of the old man.

". . . and don't you come here trying to threaten me, or I'll set about you, whether you have one leg or two. Now get out of my house, while I've a mind to let you."

Seen from the right perspective, this was funny. Rollison duly smiled. M.M.M. obviously saw it from a different perspective, because he did not look at all like laughing. He was getting up from a high chair, and Rollison noticed how quickly he moved. He was pale and angry as he said: "I'll have you thrown out on your neck, you stubborn old fool."

"Don't you abuse me or you'll get this poker across the head," Old Smith threatened shrilly. "No one's going to turn me out of my house and home, now or at any time. You can go back and tell your precious friends that. And keep your money, money's no use to me."

He swung the poker, and knocked a wad of notes flying off a small table; Rollison hadn't seen them before. M.M.M. limped towards them, and picked them up. For a moment, Rollison thought that the old man would strike him as he bent down. But Smith didn't. Clutching the wad of notes, M.M.M. turned towards the door, the old man glowered at him but did not move.

M.M.M. disappeared.

Then there was a remarkable transformation on the face of Old Smith. The rage vanished, obviously pretended. Instead of scowling, he grinned with a mixture of delight and cunning; it would not take a great deal to make him cackle. He let the poker drop with a clatter in the hearth, and then turned and went, remarkably sprightly, towards the door. His shoulders were bowed and bent, but he was nothing like a has-been.

A car engine sounded on the other side of the farmhouse. Rollison stood by the wall, as M.M.M. appeared, in a taxi. He had recovered from his leg hurt very quickly, unless he was another instance of mind over matter. He was driven towards a farm track which went to the main road; there was no way of driving straight from the farm to the cottage, one had to go to the road and back again, a mile or more, instead of four hundred yards.

Rollison went to the back. The door was open, as farmhouse doors were likely to be. A huge pile of logs was quite close to it, all old and weathered. The lawns in front were overgrown, and a few years ago there had been flowerbeds, but these had become a small wilderness. Everything carried the look and the smell of decay, and yet men had offered a fortune for this place.

Did Old Smith know why?

He was pottering about somewhere in the kitchen. Rollison went in, and

saw him at a big dresser, cutting bread from a huge loaf. The stone-flagged floor had been brushed in the middle, but dust and dirt and debris was gathered round the sides, and on a draining-board just in sight was a pile of dirty crockery, old tin cans, old packages and vegetable peelings. This was a slum in the middle of the country; no one should be allowed to live in such conditions.

Rollison went softly up a flight of twisting stairs, each tread of which was worn low, and some of which were cracked. He had to lower his head to avoid banging it. The floor of a large bedroom was concave, and a huge four-poster bed sloped down towards the middle. Unexpectedly, the bed and the linen on it looked clean. There were three other rooms, all used for junk, such junk as Rollison had never seen before. Old dressing-tables, old chairs, old sofas, all in varying stages of dilapidation, stood by big packing-cases, boxes, suitcases, piles of books, greater piles of newspapers, old brooms, old crockery, anything that might be found in a household. It was little more than a junk-house, and if anyone ever dropped a lighted cigarette in here, it would burn like tinder.

So would the farmhouse.

"Fifteen thousand pounds," Rollison murmured.

He went downstairs. The old man was sitting at the kitchen table, eating bread and butter with jam piled thick on it, and drinking tea out of a cup which looked as if it hadn't been washed for weeks. He appeared to hear nothing. Rollison looked through the big room where M.M.M. had been, and another, smaller room opposite, which meant that he had seen every room at Selby Farm.

Fifteen thousand pounds; two dead bodies; and a kidnapping; and all of these still needed explanation.

Rollison went outside, and then turned back and knocked sharply on the door. Nothing happened. He banged again, more loudly, and at last Old Smith came hobbling with his unexpected speed. He had a mahogany-coloured face with deep etched lines, a sunken mouth because he had no teeth, but he also had as clear a pair of grey eyes Rollison had seen in a man, young or old.

He barred the door.

"What do you want?" he demanded, and gave no doubt that whatever the visitor desired, he couldn't have it.

"I want to buy the farm," announced Rollison, in the mildest of voices, "and I thought you might be able to help me find a way of persuading Miss Selby to let me have it." He smiled, as if taking it for granted that he would get what he wanted. "Perhaps we could have a chat, Mr. Smith."

"We can't have a chat, now or any time," Old Smith crackled. "I haven't any time for talk with you or with anyone."

"It might be worth your while."

"It'll be worth your while to turn round and get off quicker than you came here." This was the tone Smith had used for M.M.M. "Now don't waste my time any longer."

"Mr. Smith," murmured Rollison, "I don't really want to buy the house at all, I just want to buy a story. It would be worth five hundred pounds."

The old man demanded sharply: "What story?"

"Your story, and that of Selby Farm."

"You must be daft!"

"You must have a good reason for refusing to sell the property, Mr. Smith, and—"

"I've lived here man and boy for seventy-two years and if that isn't reason enough I'd like to know what is," roared Old Smith, "and you can go back and tell your editor felly that he can't have my story for five hundred or five thousand pounds. I live a private life and I don't want my name in any scandal-mongering newspaper. Now get out. I'm in the middle of my tea."

"Don't you think you're being hard on Gillian Selby and her brother, by refusing—"

"Hard be damned to them! They're young, they've got their lives ahead of them, don't say I'm being hard. All they want is easy money, like all the young fools these days. Something for nothing, that's what they're after. But I've a right to this farm while I pay my rent, it's in the old man's will. Ask the wench, if you don't believe me. Her father made sure no one could turn me out. Now good-day to you."

"What will happen if they get a court order compelling you to leave?" asked Rollison, still mildly.

"I'd tear it up and throw it in their faces," said Old Smith, and then broke into a cackle of laughter. "But they'll never get a court order, they'll never even have the guts to try. You go back and tell your editor man that, and if you meet the Selbys, tell them it's time they stopped wasting their breath and mine."

He turned round and hobbled off; cackling.

He was very sure of himself.

Why?

Detective Inspector Bishop and a murder team were at the cottage when Rollison got back. There were eight men in all, including a police surgeon, who had formally pronounced that Charlie's life was extinct. Rollison was in time to see the body carried into a small ambulance, and to see the ambulance move off. In and about the cottage, men were taking photographs, noting footprints, barricading anything of interest, drawing lines, making sketches, taking measurements; all the paraphernalia of routine which made the difference between the professional and the amateur at work.

Gillian was in the downstairs room, still very pale, with M.M.M. Bishop saw Rollison arrive, and came to meet him.

"Did you know about the money Lodwin was supposed to have left ?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Rollison. "Has Miss Selby turned it in?"

“Yes,” Bishop said, and then took Rollison’s arm. “I don’t know how well you know Miss Selby, but our medic says that she is suffering very badly from shock, and that she ought to get away from here, and have some rest. She won’t go to a nursing home, but says she’s going to stay here until her brother gets back. Do you think you can persuade her that it won’t do any good?”

“We’d persuade her more easily if we could find her brother,” Rollison said. “Any news?”

“Give us a chance, man!”

“I feel the same way,” Rollison said, dryly. “I’ll try to get her away, but the only place I can take her to is London.”

“That’s all right,” said Bishop, and added slyly, “We’ve been in touch with the Yard, and they’re sending a man here. We didn’t want to take any chances, especially as the man killed at Brighton was known to the Yard.”

“What as?”

“You’d better ask your friend Grice,” said Bishop, “but take it from me, the important thing is to get the girl away from here.”

“Have you finished questioning her?”

“She won’t say a word: just sits and stares and looks at me as if I were a lunatic.”

“I see what she means,” said Rollison gravely, and enjoyed the smile which leaped into Bishop’s eyes. “How about this friend of hers, Monty Morne?”

“No reason why he shouldn’t go if you want him to,” said Bishop.

He was being very obliging; in fact, almost too obliging. When the police made everything easy, there was always a good reason. Rollison tried to guess what it was, and felt reasonably sure of one factor. They would prefer to have the run of the cottage and the farm without the benefit of his presence. That fitted in well with what he wanted to do: first see William Brandt, known as Tex, then make Gillian tell him who had been on the telephone.

Rollison went into the living room. There had been hostility on M.M.M.’s face before, and it was certainly present now. Gillian just looked lifeless and dejected.

“It’s time we all got out of this atmosphere and went to London,” Rollison said without preamble. “The police have no objection. We can fix you up comfortably when we’re there, Gillian. How about packing what clothes you need for a night or two?”

“It’s no use, she’s not going to budge until Alan comes back,” growled M.M.M. “You might as well stop trying to do the police’s job for them. I thought you of all people would want to see it Gillian’s way, not the police’s.”

“Nobody loves me,” Rollison said sadly, “and I don’t know that I love anyone, in this business in particular. Gillian gets the sulks. You talk like a bighead and behave like an idiot. Alan is missing, and we won’t find him by sitting moping in an armchair or telling me what a disappointment I am. I’m

going to London. You can come or stay here, as you please. If you stay, you'll probably make sure that Alan's killed, like the other two."

He turned on his heel.

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" demanded M.M.M., and managed to heave himself to his feet. There was less hostility than anger in his eyes.

"I thought I was talking to Alan Selby's sister and his closest friend. I find I'm talking to a pair of imbeciles who couldn't care less about him." Rollison lowered his voice and almost hissed: "What do you use for minds? If you want to get a message from Alan or his captors, you'll have to come away. Once the Press show that I'm involved, the most likely place to pick up a message will be my flat. That's as good a place for Gillian to stay as any, too. But please yourselves," Rollison added, and this time turned his back on them. "I'll be gone in fifteen minutes."

They stared after him.

Outside, Bishop was studying the marks of the various tyres, and straightened up.

"Got anything out of her?"

"I'll tell you in five minutes," said Rollison. "Mind telling me one thing?"

"What's that?"

"Any idea why Alan Selby disappeared, and why there's this interest in the farm?"

"No, to both."

"Has Selby got a record?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Lodwin had – what about the man who called himself

Charlie?"

"The Yard will tell you about that," said Bishop. "Get in touch with them as soon as you reach London, won't you?" He heard one of his men call him, and added: "Excuse me." He hurried off, and Rollison went to the wheel of his car and lit a cigarette.

It was smoked down to the last draw when Gillian appeared at the cottage door, carrying an overnight case, with M.M.M. limping behind her.

"Do you really think they'll try to get a message through to your flat?" Gillian asked. She was almost animated again.

"I can't think of a more likely place, once the news breaks." Rollison waited for them to get in, M.M.M. at the back where he could stretch his leg with some comfort, Gillian beside Rollison. The police took little or no interest in them. At the junction of the by-road and the main road was a police car with two men on duty; otherwise the road was empty. Rollison turned towards the London road, travelling at fair speed.

Then Gillian announced in a hard voice: "Alan telephoned me."

"That doesn't surprise me," Rollison said, and glanced at her set profile. "What did he say?"

"That he had managed to get to a telephone where he was being imprisoned," Gillian said, "and that I must stay at the cottage, it might be a

matter of life and death to him. Then another man broke in, and said that I'd be told what to do at the cottage. I hadn't time to tell him that the police were there, because he rang off. The only good thing about it is that I know Alan's alive."

But that didn't cheer her up.

She was oppressed by the sense of danger, which seemed to be following them.

11

PLENTY OF ROPE

Rollison kept his eye on the driving mirror, but no police car appeared on their tail; no car which they could not identify. The sense of danger was in their minds but not physically close to them, as far as he could judge. As he neared London and the traffic became thicker, he slowed down. The others had said very little, and Gillian seemed to be dozing; that might do her a world of good. With luck and a veronal tablet, she would go to bed early and have a night's sound sleep.

Rollison pulled up near Clapham Common, where there were several telephone boxes, and Gillian opened her eyes wide.

"Just going to make sure that the coast is clear," he said, and hurried across. It was nearly half-past six, seven hours since M.M.M. had called on him; seven hours had never gone more quickly, and none had been more crowded. He had a feeling that he couldn't even guess what was going to happen next, except that it would be something out of the blue.

He telephoned his flat, and after a pause, his man answered in his gentleman's voice :

"This is Mr. Richard Rollison's residence."

"Hallo, Jolly," said Rollison. "Remember me?"

Jolly's voice brightened. "Good evening, sir!"

"I gather you're not alone."

"No, sir, I'm not," said Jolly. "There is an American gentleman, a Mr. William Brandt, who—"

"Six feet three, coppery-coloured hair, one of my cards and a Texas drawl ?"

"Precisely, sir."

"Ask him to wait in your room until I call him out," said Rollison. "I'm bringing Miss Selby and Mr. Morne."

"Very good—" Jolly began.

"Hi, there!" called William (Tex) Brandt, on an extension, and there was a resounding note in his voice. "How are things moving along, Mr. Rollison?"

"Moderately."

"Alan Selby still missing?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll see you," the American said, and then swept into deep enthusiasm. "Say, Toff, I didn't know even the beginning of your history or I wouldn't have been so sneery back at the cottage. I've had a fascinating time with your Trophy Wall. Your Mr. Jolly's told me the story of some of the investigations, too. You must be the only shamus in the business with his own hangman's rope."

"But surely you keep an electric chair," said Rollison, and surprised

Brandt into a gasp, and silence. “Still there, Jolly?”

“Yes, sir.”

“There’s an even chance that the enemy will guess where I’m bringing Miss Selby, and they might try to stop her from arriving safely,” Rollison said. “They haven’t followed us on the road, so we’d better be on the safe side. I’ll arrive just as soon as I can. Check back and front and both ends of the street before we appear, will you?”

“You bet!” boomed Tex.

“You keep out of sight,” warned Rollison. “I don’t want Gillian or Morne to know you’ve arrived.”

“Surprise,” squeaked Tex.

Rollison grinned as he hurried back to the car. M.M.M. was leaning forward and talking, and at last had shed his mood of hostility; in fact there was a shame-faced grin at his lips as Rollison opened the door.

“Rolly, I owe you an apology,” he announced.

“There speaks a sporting gent,” said Rollison, and slid behind the wheel. “Why?”

“Behaving like a heel. You’ve dropped everything to help, and you’ve also kept this Texan away from the police, so there should be a way of making him talk. There wouldn’t be, if the police had caught him.”

“No,” agreed Rollison, almost sombrely.

“What do you say it like that for?” asked Gillian.

“Gillian, facts are facts, and it is a fact that Tex the Texan just had time to kill both Lodwin and Charlie. He had the opportunity. He was the last of anyone known to us to see Charlie alive, and he went upstairs at 51, Norton Street, before you did.”

“I can’t believe—”

“We’ll suspend beliefs in everything and everyone until we know what’s behind it all,” said Rollison. “What else were you going to say, Monty?”

“Well, it occurred to us that the swine who are holding Alan might get in touch with me, knowing I’m a close friend of the family. So it might be wiser for me to stay at my flat, and report anything that happens to you. What do you think of it?”

“It could be a good idea,” agreed Rollison. “Shall I drop you?”

“You won’t think I’m backing out?”

“But you won’t be.”

“That’s a safe bet,” said M.M.M. and went on in a clear voice: “Nothing would make me back out of this until it’s over. I want to see Alan free, and I want to see them both free of that damned farm, whether they get five or fifteen thousand for it. In fact it’s just about the most important thing in my life.”

Rollison said: “I follow.”

He drove to Bilton Street, where M.M.M. had a flat on the third floor of a small modern block. He watched each corner and the entrance as he drove up, but did not see anyone waiting. Two policemen were at a nearby corner, and two commissionaires were at the entrance. Rollison got out, and then

helped M.M.M. The younger man grunted as he put his weight on his leg and began to limp towards the entrance.

"I'll be all right now," he said. "These chaps are used to giving me a hand." He smiled at the two commissionaires, who had come forward smartly. Then his expression changed and he said tensely: "Look after Gillian, Rolly. I can't tell you how much I love that girl. Alan can look after himself."

"I'll look after her," promised Rollison. He turned to one of the commissionaires. "Pop back and tell Miss Selby that I'll be a few minutes, please." As the man moved off and M.M.M. looked at his questions, Rollison added: "I'm just going to make sure all's well at your flat. Let me have your key, will you?"

"What would be wrong, sir?" asked the other commissionaire.

Rollison smiled but didn't answer, and M.M.M. took out a bunch of keys, selected one, and said: "It's the Yale with the red speck on it. You really are thorough, aren't you?"

"When I can be," Rollison said.

He hurried to the lift, which was automatic, and then along the passage to M.M.M.'s flat, Number 37. No one was in sight. He examined the lock, and saw nothing wrong with it. He inserted the key gently, standing to one side, but the lock turned easily, and there was a sharp click. He took the key out and pushed the door; it swung open slowly and soundlessly. He moved forward very slowly, and looked inside the flat, seeing the small hall and three doors; nothing else. There was still no sound. He dropped his right hand to his pocket and went in, looking into the living room, the bedroom, the bathroom and the kitchenette. The flat was empty. He turned round slowly, swiftly, and went to the living room, where there was a writing-desk. He opened each drawer, and looked inside swiftly, found nothing of interest, and closed the drawers again. He left the door open, and would hear when M.M.M. arrived in the lift.

He went into the modern bedroom, with all the evidence of luxury. On the bedside table was a big coloured photograph of Gillian. On the dressing-table was a smaller photograph of Gillian. On the mantel-piece was a picture of Alan Selby and Gillian, taken on Brighton Pier.

Rollison listened, and heard no sound of approach.

He looked through the dressing-table drawers with a speed of long practice, and then into the wardrobe. He found nothing that shouldn't be there; there were two old crutches, and some other oddments which M.M.M. had needed when he had learned to walk again.

Rollison went out.

He heard the lift doors close, and then footsteps came rather heavily; M.M.M. walking with his limp, and the commissionaire possibly by his side. Rollison stepped towards the door, but didn't go outside at first. He listened for other sounds, and heard one: a door was opening. He crept closer to his door and peered along the passage. He saw a door opening, very slowly: suspiciously slowly. He saw M.M.M on his own, limping much more than he

had at the cottage, and frowning as if in pain.

The door opened a little more.

Rollison stepped out like a whirlwind, and M.M.M. looked astounded. Rollison threw himself at the door which was opening so slowly, but as he reached it, it slammed. He put his shoulder against the door and exerted all his strength, but it remained closed, and he wasn't likely to get it down easily. He took his automatic from his pocket and fired three times at the lock; then he thrust the door open.

A draught struck at his head. A door beyond stood wide open, and he could see into a room with an open window, and a man climbing out of it: a man with a gun.

Rollison jumped towards him.

The man fired, and the shot sounded very loud.

Rollison swerved as he went, and the shot missed him. He fired in turn. He thought he hit the man, for he saw him wince, but then a woman appeared from another room, and flung herself at Rollison, taking him completely by surprise, pulling at his gun arm. The man at the window dropped out of sight, while M.M.M. came in at the door, and the woman hacked at Rollison's shins and tried to break free. He held her very tight, and she bent down suddenly and tried to bury her teeth in the back of his hand. All he realised at this moment was that she was small and had a lot of dark hair, a canopy of hair. Her teeth scratched painfully.

Doors were opening in the passage, a man appeared, someone shouted.

"Shut that door, Monty," Rollison said swiftly.' "Keep 'em out." He saw Monty Morne slam the door in a man's face, then lean against it, for the lock wouldn't hold anyone the other side. The woman was still struggling and trying to bite and kick, but suddenly Rollison let her go and, as she staggered back, gripped her at the waist with both hands, and lifted her high off the ground. She bared her teeth and snarled at him, waved her hands and tried to strike, and kicked the empty air; but she did no damage, and Rollison held her at arm's length, as he might a bad-tempered child. He dragged her to the window, and looked out. There was a balcony just alongside and he saw open French doors.

"You can talk to us or you can talk to the police," he said to the woman. "Which is it to be?"

She stopped struggling.

"Let me go," she demanded in a hoarse voice. "Let me down, and I'll tell you."

"You'll talk now," said Rollison. "Who sent you, and what were you going to do?"

"Lodwin sent us," she answered swiftly, as if she did not know that a man named Lodwin was dead. "We had to put Morne away, that's all I know, we had to put Morne away."

"You and who else?"

"I wouldn't squeal on him even if it would save my life," she said, gaspingly. "I'll squeal on Lodwin but not on him, you needn't waste your

breath. Let me go, the police will be here in a minute. Give me a break."

Dare he let her go? And even if he dared, had she a chance to get away?

12

HOME AGAIN

Outside, men were shouting and hammering on the door. M.M.M. stood with his back to the door, sweat dripping from his forehead, his face very pale. Rollison released the woman and slipped her handbag off her arm with a movement which took her by surprise, and said: "How did you get in ?"

"We broke into the flat next door, and then came in at the window." She swung round as she spoke and made for the door she had closed, and presumably for the window. As M.M.M. moved from the door, a biggish man in a sports jacket and a small man in a navy blue suit stumbled in, and looked about. Rollison was standing with the woman's bag over his arm, and a smile which they must have found infuriating.

"What's happened here?"

"Where's the gun?"

"Who did the shooting?"

"Anyone hurt?"

"Time gentlemen, please," pleaded Rollison and swung the bag on his arm. "There was a burglar, I spotted him, he shot at me, he still has his gun, and I don't think anyone's hurt, unless it's the burglar because I shot at him, too. My name is Rollison, Scotland Yard will vouch for me, and it's time Mr. Morne went to his own flat, he's had a heavy day and his leg isn't so good."

"There was someone here. Who was it?" demanded the man in navy blue.

"A woman who got away," said Rollison, and raised his right hand, to show the teeth marks, and a little blood welling up. "She got her teeth into me, and I had to let her go." He went to M.M.M. and took his arm, and the others made way for him. "I'll be in Mr. Morne's flat when the police arrive," he added, and led the way out.

A Flying Squad car was outside in five minutes, and Rollison was being questioned in ten. He stuck to the story, and M.M.M. corroborated it. He had taken a purse, a letter and some papers out of the woman's bag before handing it over to the police; they wouldn't find it easy to trace her through that bag alone.

When the police had gone, he examined the purse, which had only money in it, and the papers. They gave him no help, except that the letter was addressed to Miss Lola Bridger, 18, Kentall Street, S.W.7.

"Any idea why Lodwin should want you dead?" he asked M.M.M.

"It's unbelievable!"

"It happened. Any ideas?"

"I haven't the faintest," said M.M.M., helplessly.

"Anything in this business that you haven't told me about?"

"No." That was almost shouted, and was much too loud.

"Monty," said Rollison, softly, "someone just tried to kill you. They might try again. You must know why."

"I haven't the faintest idea," M.M.M. insisted. "It must be something to do with this dreadful business, but I tell you I haven't the faintest idea."

"If I know the truth, I might be able to stop another attack."

"Goddam it, you know the truth!"

"Monty," said Rollison, still in that soft voice, "a peculiar thing has happened to you today. You couldn't have been more affable than you were this morning, but the next time I saw you you were very anti-Toff indeed. That's all right as far as it goes, but I want to know why."

"I'm not anti-Toff. I just think you've done a hell of a bad job, and done Gillian more harm than good. I love her, don't you understand? I love her so much it hurts to think that she might be in danger. I'll do anything I can for her, absolutely everything."

"Even keep silent when you know that another attack on your life might be successful."

"*I can't tell you anything else!*"

"Monty," persisted Rollison, "I didn't like the way you behaved on the road today. I didn't like it when you made an excuse to get away from me. I didn't like thinking that you telephoned a warning to the house in Norton Street, and so let Charlie's friends escape – doubtless believing you were helping Alan Selby and Gillian. I didn't like it when you decided to try to make Gillian throw me over. I still think I can help Gillian. I didn't even like it when you decided to be all nice and friendly at Clapham Common. You're a somewhat obvious young man, far too obvious to get away with that kind of thing. I want to know why you've changed since you came to see me this morning, and I want to know now."

M.M.M. was sitting in a small armchair, his back very straight, sweat dripping down his forehead, his hands trembling. He looked a sick man, and yet this morning he had been in buoyant spirits and, except for his leg, in boisterous health.

"It—it's not true," he muttered. "You're imagining things."

"Am I imagining that your mood changed entirely when you were at the Wheatsheaf for lunch?" asked Rollison. "Is it imagination that there were two men, not one, in the Wheatsheaf interested in the farm, and that I followed one, the man Charlie, and the other talked to you? He put the fear of death into you, Monty, didn't he?"

"You—you're crazy!"

"Or the fear of the death of Gillian. Which was it?"

"*I tell you you're making it all up!*"

"If I hadn't come ahead you would probably have been killed."

"*They wouldn't have killed me, they would only—*"

M.M.M. broke off, realising that he had made just the admission which Rollison needed. Would he give up, now, or would he try to fight on? He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed his forehead, gulped, and then dabbed again.

"Let's have it, Monty," Rollison urged.

"I—I couldn't help myself," muttered M.M.M. "I didn't know how serious the situation was when I talked to Gillian this morning, if I had I wouldn't have told you. You—you're right. Another man came into the Wheatsheaf, and sat at my table. He said that if I didn't get you off the job, he'd kill Gillian."

"And you believed him."

"I couldn't take a chance with Gillian."

"Let's pass that," said Rollison. "What was he like?"

"He was an American. If you ask me, he and Brandt are in this together."

"We'll find out. What about tipping off the people at Norton Street?"

"He gave me a telephone number and told me to ring there if—if you looked like getting too close. I had to do it, if I hadn't it would have been letting Gillian down. I could tell that he was serious, he—he showed me proof that he'd got Alan prisoner, and told me that if he didn't get hold of the farm he would kill both Alan and Gillian. The only way to help them was to get you off the case, and then persuade Gillian to sell."

"So that's what you were going to do?"

"Yes, I had to. I thought we could butter you up a bit, and—well, what else *could* I do?" Now that it was off his chest, M.M.M. seemed less troubled, but kept dabbing at his forehead. "I still think the only safe thing is to let these swine buy the farm."

"Do you know why they want it?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"I'd never heard of them until this morning. Of course I don't know."

"How much did they offer you for your help to get me off the job, and to persuade Gillian to sell?"

"That's a swine of a question. You know damned well that the only thing they could offer me was Gillian's safety, and after that, Alan's. Money didn't enter into it. Good God! I've got enough money for anything I'll ever want in this life."

"All right, no hysterics," said Rollison. "Now, about this man who warned you?"

"He came in just after you'd left, a biggish chap in a brown suit. He had a whispering kind of voice but he was American all right. He drove that black Humber, the car Charlie came in. Mildred and Bert couldn't hear a thing he was saying, although they were at the bar all the time. And you can call me everything you like, but I still think that the wise thing is to buy this swine off."

"In spite of two murders?"

"You talk as if ordinary, decent people had been killed, instead of a couple of crooks!"

"Monty," murmured Rollison, "their way of earning a living apart, a lot of crooks are ordinary, decent people. They have wives and children who mourn them when they die, and a lot of very good qualities."

"These two were brutes! They would have killed—"

"They daren't kill Gillian until they have the farm, and they daren't use too much pressure because any sale made under pressure could be ruled invalid," said Rollison. "They could use threats, but couldn't do physical harm to Gillian. That speaks for itself."

"That's what you say," Monty almost sneered.

"All right," said Rollison, crisply. "And the couple waiting in the other flat were going to ginger up your spirit of co-operation. Ever seen the woman before?"

"No."

"I hope that's true," said Rollison, and seemed to relax; but he had never been further from relaxing. "Monty, I want you to try to remember this. You never benefit from making a deal with bad men. You can't buy safety and you can't buy an easy conscience. If you do what this man in brown orders, and persuade Gillian to sell the farm, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. That might not be for long, because once you've done what you're wanted for, you might be rubbed out. Nice, expressive phrase, rubbed out, even if it is a little old fashioned. They're expert at the rubbing process. They've killed two men, and I think they would cheerfully have killed me. Don't fall for it, Monty. Come back on my side."

M.M.M. didn't answer, and before Rollison could speak again, there came a sharp ring at the front door-bell. He glanced at the door, and M.M.M. turned round, as if glad that he didn't have to listen to anything more from Rollison.

"This will be the police to ask more questions," Rollison said. "I'm going out by the fire escape, but tell them who I am, and that they'll be welcome at my flat any time of the day and night."

M.M.M. only stared at him.

Gillian was sitting in the car near the corner, watching police cars and the crowds which gathered; obviously she hadn't got out, and nothing had happened to alarm her except the evidence of trouble.

"Is Monty all right?" she asked quickly.

"Perfectly, and so am I," said Rollison. "Charming of you to ask." He squeezed her hand. "I hope that Monty will see things my way in future." She didn't answer, and he started off, watched but not stopped by the policemen at the main entrance.

Jolly opened the flat door before he reached it. His lined face would soon be wrinkled, his sparse grey hair was neat, his eyes were the eyes of an affectionate sheepdog. He looked at Gillian with surprise; and in spite of her tensions and her worries, she was quite lovely.

Rollison led her straight to the spare room, which had its own tiny bathroom.

"Tidy yourself up, and let me know when you're feeling respectable again," he said.

She looked into his eyes.

“Rolly, I don’t know whether you’re right or wrong, but thank you for being so charming,” she said. “I know I’ve been a little beast.” When Rollison smiled, she went on with more spirit: “And don’t say it’s nothing: it’s a great deal.” Then she burst out: “Do you know if Tex Brandt’s been here yet?”

Her expression told Rollison that one day she was likely to have bad news for Montagu Montmorency Morne; that was a strangely ironical fact.

“I think he’ll turn up,” Rollison said.

He did not remind her that Brandt could have killed both Charlie and Lodwin. He closed the door on her, and went back into the big room, and told Jolly to send the American in. He stood with his back to the remarkable Trophy Wall.

The Texan came striding in; he seemed to grow in stature every time Rollison saw him.

“Hallo, Mr. Rollison, it’s good to see you again,” he greeted, and held out his hand.

Rollison took it.

“Hiya, Tex,” he said. “Used any lethal daggers lately?” He twisted his arm, and quite suddenly Brandt was bent almost double, held in a grip which he could not escape unless he wanted to break his arm. He was still looking flabbergasted when Jolly came in, and Rollison said: “Search him, Jolly, just in case he has a bloodstained knife.”

13

TEX TELLS

Jolly was both expert and quick. Tex made no attempt to free himself as hands dipped in and out of his pockets, sometimes coming out empty, sometimes loaded: as with an elaborate pocket knife, a cigarette-lighter with a hole in the wrong place, and a small compact automatic pistol of German make. Jolly next ran his hands along Tex's legs, arms, waist and chest, and then drew back. As he did so, Rollison released the Texan, smiled cheerfully, and said: "What are you going to have to drink ?"

"I need Bourbon on the rocks," Tex said, in a bewildered way.

"Bourbon on the rocks for Mr. Brandt, Jolly," said Rollison, and went to the large desk where the weapons had been placed. "Quite an armoury," he observed, and picked up the palm gun. "One of the Toledo jobs, isn't it, made by Yanez." He weighed the automatic in his hand. "Otto Schmidt, of Hamburg, gets better and better. Isn't the knife American made?"

Tex said: "Sure."

"Don't ever let it be said that I left a man defenceless in a foreign land," murmured Rollison, and handed all three of the weapons back. "Unless you've a licence for that automatic I shouldn't let the police know you have it, and the lighter could get you into a lot of trouble. I know. I've got one. Does yours fire slugs or gas pellets?"

"Slugs," answered Brandt, a little less weakly.

"I prefer gas pellets," Rollison confided. "They're just as quick, they scare more, and if I get caught ladling them out, no one gets so angry. You probably don't know it, but the police in this country can be very tough when they think you're going to throw lead about."

"I'm beginning to find out that in this country a lot of people can be tough," declared Brandt, in a voice that was much nearer normal. He began to smile. "I'm beginning to understand how you acquired those trophies, too. How about hanging me up there?"

"I hope you won't have to be hanged," said Rollison, judicially, and glanced round as Jolly came in, with a tray with a bottle of Bourbon, a bottle of Scotch, soda water and ice cubes. He placed these on the desk, then went to a corner and opened a cupboard to take out glasses. "Did anyone call when I was out, Jolly?"

"Yes, sir." Jolly began to pour out drinks, and the American watched him, fascinated.

"Who?"

"There were a number of social calls of which I have made a note, and Lady Rimgedden is anxious to know whether you will open the Borstal Boys Bazaar next month. It appears that Lord Rimgedden was to have arranged it with you, and overlooked it."

"Are we free?"

"Yes, sir."

"We will open the bazaar."

"I'm sure Lady Rimgedden will be delighted, and I will telephone her at once," said Jolly, who spoke in exactly the same level tone all the time, and did not appear even to blink. "An American gentleman who did not give his name also telephoned."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir. He left a message."

"What message?"

Jolly glanced at Tex Brandt, but Rollison made no comment, so the manservant went on, still without flickering an eyelid: "He said that unless you withdrew from the investigation into the disappearance of Alan Selby and the mysterious events at Selby Farm, you would be seriously inconvenienced, sir."

"Oh, *no*," breathed Tex.

"Get out, stay out or be put out," mused Rollison. "When was this?"

"An hour ago."

"Hmm. What did you tell him?"

"I said that I would pass on your message, sir."

"Gimme that drink," said Tex Brandt, and grabbed and tossed down much Bourbon and little water. "If I weren't standing here and listening, I wouldn't believe this could be taking place," he said.

"Oh, it happens every day," declared Rollison lightly. "That the lot, Jolly?"

"Mr. Grice telephoned."

"Ah."

"He will be coming round this evening, sir, about half-past eight, and asks that you leave a message for him if you will not be in."

"Oh."

"I just can't bear this suspense," said Tex, and held his glass in front of him as if he were likely to finish the drink at the next gulp. "Who is Mr. Grice?"

"Superintendent William Grice of New Scotland Yard," Jolly informed him, and then paused slightly to indicate a change of subject, and added to Rollison: "Will you be in to dinner, sir?"

"Yes. All three of us."

"Three?" ejaculated Tex. "Who's the third? I—" he broke off, glanced at Jolly, finished his drink and dropped on to the arm of a chair. "I just don't get it," he said. "You look too feudal to sit down at the same table together. Don't get me wrong, I'm not being rude, I'm just being American."

"We *quite* understand," said Jolly, and for the first time gave a slight emphasis to the one word. He bowed. "If there is nothing else, sir, I will prepare dinner."

"Remember that all I had for lunch was a miniature pork pie and a pint," said Rollison. He turned to Tex as Jolly went out, softly. "No," he added

firmly.

"No what?" asked Tex, faintly.

"Jolly is not available for New York, Chicago, Miami Beach, Las Vegas or Hollywood."

"I wouldn't want Jolly," asserted Tex. "I would want you." He lit his cigarette and drew deeply on it, drained his glass as if forgetting that he had already emptied it, glanced at the bottle, and went on: "Would you mind telling me something?"

Rollison refilled his glass.

"Probably. What is it?"

"What made you think I might have killed the man Lodwin?"

"Because you also had the chance to kill the man Charlie," answered Rollison, and handed him the glass.

Tex Brandt took it, but sat very still, and didn't drink or speak for what seemed a long time. Rollison judged him to be rather older than he had seemed: in the middle-thirties. He was rather more handsome, too, and the colour of his hair was quite beautiful.

"So I could have gone back and killed him."

"Or killed him before we left."

"I didn't."

"You'll have the police to satisfy, not me."

"How easy will that be?"

"It won't be easy at all, once they know you're around," said Rollison. "So far I don't think they've any idea, but I wouldn't be too sure. We've a weak link in the chain."

Tex drank Bourbon as if it were lemonade.

"Name of Morne," he remarked.

"You know him?"

"Sure, I know of him," Tex said, and put his glass down, drew again on his cigarette and stubbed it out half-finished, then stood up and walked to the Trophy Wall; but he paid no attention to the weapons there, no attention even when he brushed past the hangman's rope and set it swinging. "Mr. Rollison," he said, and his voice seemed to be more noticeably from the Wild West, "I guess it's time I told you more about myself and what I'm doing here. I told you that I came from New York to buy Selby Farm, and I'm working on behalf of a wealthy American. Maybe I forgot to say wealthy, but you'd guess that. He wouldn't have used me unless he expected trouble, and he told me that someone else would try to buy the farm, and use Lodwin and maybe other guys. I was to stop them." Slowly, Tex shook his head, and his eyes looked dazed. "Two guys have certainly been stopped," he said. "No wonder you think I killed them."

"I just think you might have."

"Thanks. My client told me to be very careful of Lodwin, he was a psycho. From the way Lodwin talked to Miss Selby and tried to buy that farm, I guess my client was right. It was the corniest interview I've ever heard. Lodwin just told her she had to sell, and that was that. My client told me

that the other guy who wanted to buy the farm would try to get it legally first, but would get it somehow, if he couldn't buy it. He couldn't buy, so he kidnapped Selby and then put pressure on Gillian through Lodwin."

"You think Lodwin and Charlie both worked for the same man – your client's rival?"

"Yes," answered Tex.

"Who is this rival?"

"That I don't know."

"An American?"

"Could be."

"An American threatened Morne, and scared him enough to make him warn the people at the Brighton house we were on the way."

"So they killed Lodwin, knowing we were also going there," Tex said, heavily.

"If Lodwin and Charlie both worked in different ways for this rival of your client, why should he kill them?" Rollison reasoned.

"You're asking me," Tex said. "I don't know."

"An American, probably the same one, has also threatened me," Rollison went on. "I want to meet him. Your client knows who he is, so – who is your client?"

"I'm going to telephone him tonight," Tex said, carefully. "I'm going to ask if he will name his rival, and also ask his authority to tell you his own name. If he refuses, then I guess I'll tell you anyway, but I'd rather handle it this way. I'll be better off if I do. I'm due to collect another five thousand when I get back to New York, provided I play the game the way my client wants it."

"That makes sense," said Rollison. "Why does he want to get Selby Farm?"

"That I don't know, either."

It was never possible to be absolutely sure that a man was telling the truth, but Tex Brandt was certainly convincing. He met Rollison's gaze quite levelly, and there was a great deal to like about him, as well as his looks. Rollison moved to the window and looked out, but saw no one who appeared to be taking any particular notice of this house, 22, Gresham Terrace, Mayfair. Dusk was falling, and soon it would be dark; if the day's events were anything to go by, then the night would be busy indeed.

Rollison turned round.

The half-light fell upon him, making him look startlingly handsome, making his tall, lithe body seem to be straining after action. Just standing there, contemplating the American, he was a personality no one was ever likely to forget. And opposite him were those trophies of his fantastic record in the fight against crime.

"Let's get your theory quite straight. Your client has one rival, that rival employed Lodwin and Charlie, and they're both dead."

"Would a man kill his own legman?" Tex asked, quietly. "And would a policeman believe it?"

"No."

"Toff," said Tex again, "I did not kill either man."

"Tex," said Rollison, very softly, "I sure hope you didn't."

He turned to look out of the window again. It was much darker, although the street lamps were on. He hadn't put on the lights in the room, and made no move to do so. He beckoned the Texan, who joined him, and he pointed to a black car standing a little way along the street. "That's a police car," he said. "The police are behaving in an odd way over this. I wouldn't like to say why. Possibly they know a lot more than they've told me. But the sight of a police car there means we don't have to worry too much about Party Number 3 for the time being. We can relax." He relaxed enough to stroll across the big room and switch on the lights. "But keep away from the window in case of accident, the flat immediately opposite is to let. Queer things have come from empty flats before now. Ever met Gillian Selby before?"

"I have not."

"Do you always behave as if you've known a girl all your life when you've met her only five minutes ago?"

"It's the first time I've met a girl like Gillian Selby," the American declared, and he sounded as if he meant it. "I had never seen her, Rollison. I discovered that Lodwin was going to the cottage and got there ahead of him. That was the first time I'd been there. But I knew that Morne was a friend of the Selbys, I'd got that far; and I knew he was in love with Gillian. Don't ask me how, it's my job to find out what there is to find out, and it isn't so difficult."

"You make it easy," Rollison murmured, and their eyes gleamed; here were two men with obvious mutual liking. "Tex, assuming you're all you say you are, and assuming we have to unite against your client's rival, there is a big problem. Monty Morne and Gillian decided to sell the farm so as to secure Alan Selby's release that way. I've just come from Morne. He pretended to change his approach, but I wouldn't trust him. He would do anything to make sure that Gillian owes him a debt she will just have to repay. Do you follow that?"

"Sure."

"So if we're not careful you may find that your rival has bought the farm."

"It's a risk, but it's one I have to take," Tex Brandt said, and shrugged his broad shoulders. "I want to work on Gillian Selby myself, though. I think I could make money talk."

"Nothing will talk so loudly as her brother," Rollison told him. "If you want that farm, you've got to find the brother. Any ideas about where to look?"

"I haven't a notion," Tex declared. "That's God's truth, Rollison."

"Then it's going to be very tough," Rollison said, "and the only hope of getting results is to find who else is working for your rival, or find him in person, and persuade them to talk. The chap who telephoned me might be

the man to work through, if he makes a crack at me we should be able to hold him." Now he seemed to be talking almost to himself.

He stopped.

He moved so swiftly that Tex Brandt could hardly believe it possible, and reached the door which led to the large lounge hall and the front door. He dropped his right hand to his pocket and opened the door a crack and peered through. He relaxed.

"I thought I heard the front door close," he said, "but there's no one there. I—" then he drew a sharp breath and his expression became one of devastating understanding. "*She's run away*," he cried, then flung the door wide open, and rushed to the outer door.

14

LADY LOST

Rollison saw the empty landing.

He heard footsteps, stealthy at first, but as he jumped towards the head of the stairs they became louder and sharper: of a woman, running. He didn't look round to see if the American was following, but simply placed one hand on the banister rail, and leaped; by supporting himself against the rail he covered the whole of the long flight of stairs in one jump: eighteen stairs in all. He landed lightly on the half landing below. The sharp clatter of a woman's footsteps was now very loud.

Rollison repeated the trick at the next landing.

He landed, and saw Gillian, on the last flight but one, turning and staring upwards but running at the same time.

She stumbled, recovered herself, and ran on. Rollison made another leap, and this time landed awkwardly. He had to lose time to recover, and kicked his own leg a little; he didn't leap down again, but began to run down the stairs. He was at the head of the last flight of stairs while Gillian was half way along the hall passage, near the closed front door.

Tex Brandt came running from above, but he was a long way behind.

Rollison leaped the final flight, and was at the foot of the stairs as Gillian began to open the front door. A cold draught of air swept in.

"Hallo," said Rollison, not at all breathless. "Anywhere I can take you?" He covered the ground between them so swiftly that she didn't get out of the open door. A street light fell on her face, and it was easy to understand why the Texan had said that he had never met a girl like Gillian Selby.

"I want to leave this house," she said, sharply.

"Well, if you must, you must," concluded Rollison, sadly, "but don't go walking out into the arms of the murderers, will you? They're always around."

"You're only trying to scare me."

"Gillian," said Rollison, placing a hand on her arm, "in all honesty I can say that I don't need to scare you. You're scared out of your wits already, and you've every right to be. But you can't do a deal with these people over Alan, and it's useless to think you can."

"I've got to," she said, simply. "I've just got to. I thought I could leave everything to you, and I tried, but now I just can't help myself. I've got to sell the farm and release Alan. I've been turning it over in my mind ever since I arrived here, and that's my final decision. I'm going to see Monty now. He knows that it's the only sane thing to do."

There was a kind of entreaty in her manner, as if she was pleading with Rollison not to try to dissuade her; and as she stood there, Tex Brandt reached the passage and approached. She turned to him.

"Make him let me go," she pleaded.

"Gillian, there's no need to ask anyone to let you go, if you want to leave you're as free as the air. But I don't think you should leave." Rollison saw her look away from the Texan back to him, and he had never tried more hard to sound convincing. "I'm afraid you'll sell the farm without getting Alan back. These people only say they are holding him. They only say they'll release him. Once they have the deeds of the farm, they might kill him."

"There's no reason to think that, you're only trying to frighten me!"

"I've dealt with bad men before," Rollison reminded her, "and they work to a pattern. Come back, have dinner, and let's discuss it. Tex Brandt and I are both trained in this sort of problem, and we only want to help. But if you still think you ought to leave when we've finished, all right—I'll take you to Monty's, and you'll have to make a deal yourselves."

"I shall still want to leave," she insisted.

"But come and have dinner first," urged Rollison. "Try to relax, and don't make an impulsive decision. You could make the worst mistake of your life if you do."

Jolly's dinner was a gourmet's delight.

First the white and then the red wines were exactly right.

Even Gillian seemed to relish the meal, and afterwards seemed much more relaxed, but when they had done their best to dissuade her, she said: "It's no use at all. I've got to exchange the farm for Alan, I just can't refuse. If I did and anything happened to him, I'd be haunted by it for the rest of my life."

"Why don't you sleep on it?" Tex urged. "They want the farm so badly that it won't do any harm to wait. They will just have to hold your brother until they get what they want."

"Tex," responded Gillian, very calmly, "you want to buy the farm, too. You can't be disinterested. Rolly might be, but I think he's so dispassionate that he can't really see the best thing for Alan. He wants to apply a principle of what is right and what is wrong. I want to save Alan's life. And these people have killed twice, so we know they wouldn't hesitate to kill again."

Tex said helplessly: "Well, I give up."

"I'll take you to Monty's place," promised Rollison. He pressed a bellpush, and Jolly came in, as if Rollison had rubbed a magic lamp. "Jolly, try to contact Mr. Grice and say I'll be delayed. If you can't stop him coming, when he arrives tell him I hope to be back by half-past ten. Mr. Brandt will stay in the spare room, and if Mr. Grice comes and wants to look round, just introduce him as a friend of mine."

"Very good, sir."

Gillian put a hand on the Toff's.

"Rolly, I know you think I'm a fool, but I'm sure it's the right thing to do."

"You have to live with your conscience," Rollison said.

"You going to call Morne, and make sure he's home?" asked Tex. He

couldn't look away from Gillian, and seemed to hate the thought that she was leaving.

"No," said Rollison, "I'd like to judge his reaction when we get there. And I'd like Gillian to see it, too. Hat and coat on, Gillian, if we're going to be thrown to the lions, let's get it over."

Tex said: "That's exactly what it's going to be."

The police car followed Rollison and Gillian, who were in the scarlet Allard. Rollison did nothing to try to evade it. He pulled up closer to the front entrance of the small block of flats. Night duty men were there now, and two policemen were strolling together along the street, but nothing suggested that there had been any sensation here during the day.

Rollison helped Gillian out.

She had glanced at him a great deal while they had been in the car, but now stared straight ahead of her. She was hatless and wore just a light top coat, but clothes made little difference. The way she walked, looked, smiled, made her quite sensational and even the commissionaires stared at her, then hurried forward to open the lift doors.

"Is Mr. Morne in?" Rollison asked.

"Oh, yes, sir." The man who answered had a faint Irish brogue. "He's been in ever since he came back from going out. The doctor's been to see him, he's hurt that leg of his that he hasn't got, and a friend is there with him now."

"Friend?" asked Rollison sharply.

"Yes, sir, at least he said he was a friend, and went straight up and he certainly hasn't come down. It was half an hour ago, I should say, not much more for certain."

"Friend," echoed Rollison, and held Gillian's arm. "We'll go and see."

They went up in the swift moving lift. No one was in the passage when they stepped out. They turned towards M.M.M.'s flat, the girl now a little hesitant. Rollison kept his right hand in his pocket, and pressed the bell with his left; it sounded quite clearly.

Then, M.M.M. opened the door.

In his right hand there was a large Service revolver, on his face a look which suggested that he would be quite prepared to use it.

Instead, his face lit up.

"Gillian, thank God you've come! Alan's here, and he's desperately anxious to talk to you."

There was a moment's breathless pause. Then: "Alan!" cried Gillian, and thrust herself past M.M.M. and ran across the small hall. As she went, a man appeared at the living room door, tall and spare, with his fair hair golden, and his small nose snub. Gillian flung herself into his arms. He held her tightly and did not at first look over her head at Rollison or M.M.M. When he did look up, Rollison saw that his eyes were bloodshot, that he needed a shave, and that he looked scared.

Rollison closed the door behind him, but M.M.M. barred his path.

“Rolly,” said M.M.M. in a firm voice, “I know it was my fault for asking your help, but we really don’t need you any more. Alan’s been released on condition that they sell the farm, and that’s the only possible thing to do. All the persuasion in the world won’t make them change their minds now. You might as well accept defeat for once. No one even knows you’re working on the case, so it won’t do your prestige any harm.”

He looked plump, earnest and pleading, and although the big revolver was still in his hand, it was pointing towards the floor.

Gillian freed herself from her step-brother’s arms, and said:

“Are you all right? Have they hurt you? Tell me if they have, please tell me.”

Alan Selby said: “I had a bad time, but I’m not hurt. Gillian, we’ve just got to sell the farm, and forget it. They’ll persecute us until we do. If you’d heard some of the things they threatened to do to you, you’d understand why we must sell to them.”

“Of course we must,” Gillian said, “and we’re going to. It’s all right, Alan, you needn’t worry.”

Alan Selby was certainly much older than his sister. He had been father, mother, brother to her, and now she was mothering him, soothing him, obviously aware that he needed her reassurance. He had a scared look in his eyes, and no one could doubt that he was nervous and jumpy.

“Rollison,” said M.M.M., “don’t make me put it into words of one syllable.”

“Let’s hear it, anyhow,” Rollison encouraged.

“I hate to say it, old chap, but you’re not wanted here.”

“Ah,” said Rollison. “You never said an un-truer word.” He went nearer the others, and Alan Selby looked at him with a kind of nervous defiance, a man in his late thirties who might be in the early fifties, judging by his present looks. “Selby,” said Rollison, “how much are they going to pay for the farm?”

“Forget it, Rolly,” M.M.M. said.

“Five thousand,” Selby answered, “and that’s a thousand more than it’s worth.”

“There’s an offer of fifteen thousand.”

“I don’t give a damn whether there’s an offer of fifteen or fifty thousand, I can’t stand this strain any longer,” Selby shouted. “They’ve been after me for weeks. I didn’t tell Gillian because I thought it would frighten her. They’ve telephoned, stopped me on the road, whispered to me at the local, they haven’t given me a minute’s peace for weeks. I tried to hold out, but I can’t do it any longer, I’m terrified of what they’ll do. I can’t help it if we lose money, I just can’t help it. Now get out, and stop trying to persuade us. We’ve got to sell that farm.”

The girl turned round and her expression told Rollison that the quicker he left, the better she would like it. Selby’s eyes said the same thing, less politely. M.M.M. stepped towards the door and began to open it.

Then he jumped and his gun rose sharply, for the door was thrust against

him, and a tall, brown-clad man stepped in.

"Hallo, Rolly," this man said, ignoring the gun and the couple in the living room doorway. "I thought I might find you here."

"Hallo, Bill," said Rollison, in just as equable a voice. "How are tricks at Scotland Yard?"

"Scotland *Yard*?" echoed M.M.M., and backed a pace. Then hastily he thrust the revolver under his coat.

"Meet Superintendent William Grice," introduced Rollison brightly. "Do you want to see me or the rest of the party, Bill? I'll go, if you'd rather be alone."

"I'd like a word with all of you," said Grice. He was tall, broad and lean. His skin was sallow, his features were good, the nose rather large and hooked, with the skin stretched very tight at the bridge, making it look almost white. His brown hair was flecked with grey, and he held his hat in his hand.

He wasn't smiling as he looked at M.M.M. and Gillian.

"You don't want to talk to us," cried M.M.M., and he pointed a quivering finger at Rollison. "You want to talk to *him.* You want to ask him why he's sheltering a murderer in his flat, an American who killed those men today."

Jealousy made him say that, of course, because Gillian so obviously liked Tex Brandt. But he also had reason on his side, as Grice would be quick to see.

15

M.M.M. SQUEAKS

Grice's expression did not change, and nor did Rollison's. The brother and sister backed into the living room, while M.M.M.'s finger gradually stopped quivering, and finally his arm dropped to his side. Grice had been looking at him all the time.

"How long have you known about this, Mr. Morne?" Grice asked at last.

"Since I got to London. Brandt – that's the Yank – left us to telephone, and Miss Selby told me what had happened. It's the truth, he had a chance to kill both men. Why, Rollison actually told her that the American had done it!"

Gillian was coming forward. It was difficult to guess what was in her mind, but she looked more pale than any time since she had left the cottage.

"That isn't quite true," she said. "I told him that Mr. Rollison regarded Mr. Brandt as a suspect."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"Not quite," said Grice, surprisingly mildly. "Mr. Rollison will be coming across to Scotland Yard soon, to answer a few questions, I can deal with that matter then. What time did you hear about it, Mr. Morne?"

"It must have been about six o'clock."

"You've taken a long time to report it to the police."

"It's the first chance I had, it—"

"You made a statement about an assault which took place in this building early this evening, and could have made this accusation then," said Grice coldly. "I hope you will realise that withholding material information is an extremely grave matter and can lead to most unpleasant consequences."

M.M.M.'s finger quivered again.

"What about *him*?"

"Would you mind telling us what you want quickly?" asked Gillian quietly. "My brother needs a good rest."

Grice looked at Selby, and could come only to the same conclusion as Rollison: that here was a man who looked jumpy and on edge, unshaven, with bloodshot eyes: a frightened man. In a different way, M.M.M. was frightened, too. The girl was much more composed than either of them, and it seemed to Rollison that her whole mood was governed by the fact that she had found her brother. She was no longer frightened, but was resigned to whatever was to come.

"I understand that you were taken away from your home against your will," Grice said to Selby. "Is that true, Mr. Selby?"

"Yes, it's true," answered Selby, "and nothing you can do or say will alter my mind. I had to meet a man who called himself Charlie at one o'clock this morning, outside the cottage. He forced me to go away with him. He said

that I'd be released once my sister had agreed to sell Selby Farm to him. I—I was kept without food or drink, and they beat me with a rubber truncheon." His voice quivered. "And they threatened my sister."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Until today, there were the three of them, Lodwin, this Charlie, and a kind of man-of-all-the-dirty-work; I don't know his name. There was also an American. I didn't see him, but I couldn't mistake an American voice. It must be this Brandt."

"How did you escape?" asked Grice.

"I didn't escape, I was allowed to go. Two men brought me in a car to the next street, and told me exactly what they'd do if I didn't persuade my sister to sell the farm to their representative."

"Who is their representative now?"

"They're going to tell me. I don't know yet," said Selby. "But it's my sister's farm, you can't stop her from doing what she likes with it. It's no crime to sell what you possess."

"It's a crime to conspire with criminals to break the law, Mr. Selby."

"They won't be breaking the law by buying the farm! It's hers to sell. They broke the law by kidnapping me, but that's nothing to do with me."

"They broke the law with two little matters of murder."

"You can't prove it. That was probably this American, Brandt," Selby said angrily. "Why don't you go and deal with him?"

"Mr. Selby," said Grice, in a sharper voice, "you seem to have peculiar ideas about the proper way to behave. I have two officers outside. They are going to ask you, your sister and Mr. Morne for detailed statements. When I have studied those statements I can decide whether I should take any action. You yourself may not be involved in this, but both Mr. Morne and your sister appear to have been in a position to murder or to abet one or both of the murders – of Charles Habden and Reginald Lodwin. The statements must be extremely detailed."

He turned towards the door.

"You've no right—" M.M.M. began.

"I know exactly what rights I have and I shall assert them," Grice said aggressively. He took a paper out of his pocket. "Here is a search warrant for this apartment, consequent upon your statement about the assault this afternoon, and doubts cast upon it by other witnesses."

He opened the door, and two plain-clothes men from the Criminal Investigation Department came in, while a third stayed outside, obviously to be on guard.

Grice turned to look at the trio.

"Your statements will be taken separately, and will be closely scrutinised for inaccuracies and errors of any kind. I don't need to tell you how serious this matter is."

Selby said in a quivering voice : "How—how long will it take?"

"I don't know." Grice was sharp. "Why?"

"I—I'm supposed to be—" Selby broke off.

"You're supposed to give yourself up at a certain time, no doubt," said Grice. "We shan't stop you, Mr. Selby. In fact we shall help you. We're very anxious indeed to meet your abductors."

He went out.

Rollison followed him, and had at least one cause for satisfaction. Grice had affected all three so much that none of them looked at him, Rollison; only at the man from Scotland Yard.

Outside in the passage, Rollison said mildly: "Very impressive, Bill. That's the first time for years that I really enjoyed playing second fiddle."

"I'm glad you enjoyed something," Grice said, "because if you mix with the Lodwins and the Charlie Habdens of this world much more, you'll be in serious trouble. What made you decide to act as wet-nurse to the American?"

"Thirst for information," declared Rollison. "He's a mine of it. Bill, the behaviour of the police has been a bit odd in this show, and it still is. Am I to be kept in suspense and under observation too, or can you tell me what it's all about?"

They reached the lift.

Grice said: "We've known for some days that Lodwin and Habden were on some job. Both have records, and we wanted to find out what they were after, and who they worked for. They were the leaders of a party of four who often hired themselves out. Lodwin was a con-man, Charlie Habden an all-rounder with a trick of scaring his victims – his chief forte was blackmail – and they used two men to do the rough work. We don't know who hired them this time. We don't know who killed Lodwin and Habden, either. We do know that they had been exerting pressure on Selby for some time. There's no doubt they kidnapped him. The problem is – who and where is the murderer? Could Morne have killed Lodwin?"

"No, he hadn't time. He's behaving as if he'd like to kill me, though."

"Don't tell me he surprises you," Grice said. "He's been suffering pretty badly for a long time after the shock of losing that leg. He and Selby are just about at the end of their tether, and they'll do anything to get out of danger. I shouldn't blame them too much."

"Kind-hearted copper," murmured Rollison. "I'll try to be charitable, too. What's the drill now? Let Selby go, follow him, and grab the people he joins?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think he'll lead you to them?"

"Desperation."

"I wouldn't place that bet," said Rollison. "How long has he been under pressure, do you say?"

"As far as we can say, three weeks or so."

"Hmm. Bill," said Rollison, "I don't think he'll lead you to the kidnapping killers. I think you're going the wrong way about it. You ought to clap him in irons, so to speak – you could find a dozen things to charge him with if you really tried hard. Get him out of the way, and stop him from exerting

too much influence on his sister. Do the same with Morne. Charge them with whatever you like; so that the girl will be on her own, and the people who want the farm will have to deal with her direct. Then we really ought to see the sparks fly."

"The trouble with you is that you're utterly irresponsible," Grice complained. "It's not so easy to make charges as you seem to think, we have to work by rule and regulation. I'll tell you someone who I am going to charge."

"Who?"

"A man who calls himself William Brandt, from Abilene, Texas," said Grice. "Your guest, in other words. He could have killed both Lodwin and Habden, and he had motive, because he wants to buy the farm. He could be fooling the great Toff."

"Oh, that's simple," agreed Rollison. "How?"

"Work it out."

"Using the rest of the Lodwin gang to exert pressure on the Selbys, while he makes friends with Gillian on the side, so that if anything goes wrong he can get the farm that way."

"At least you can still think," conceded Grice. "Like to be present when we charge Brandt?"

"With what?"

"Habden's murder."

"Poor Charlie," said Rollison, as if sorrowfully. "Yes, I'd like to be there; I'd like to see how Tex handles a situation as bad as that. On the whole I think I'd be prepared for some surprises, Bill. He is an unexpected young man."

"As Morne came to see you we guessed you'd fall for this job," Grice said, dryly. "Your flat has been watched since midday, and we knew the minute this stranger arrived; obviously he's Brandt. The flat's been watched back and front ever since," went on Grice.

"I'd like to see him handle this situation!"

"So would I," murmured Rollison, and sounded as if he meant it. "Bill."

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't know why everyone wants Selby Farm, would you ? You wouldn't know what makes it so valuable?"

"I don't know yet," answered Grice, "but it's one of the things I'm going to find out. Now, let's go downstairs." He pressed a button for the lift. "On the way, you can search your conscience and decide what you're going to put in the statement you're going to make when we all get to the Yard."

"Me too?"

"You especially."

The lift came up, and the doors opened automatically. Rollison stood aside for Grice to pass, then followed him, and Grice pressed the button for the ground floor. After a pause, the doors began to close.

"Well, I didn't think I'd be reduced to this," said Rollison. He beamed, shouldered Grice to the back of the lift, and squeezed out between the

closing doors. He had to pull his arm free to let the doors close. He pressed the button of the other lift, saw the *Lift Coming* sign light up, and wondered whether Grice would go down, stop at the next floor or press an alarm button and come back here. In either case Rollison had only a few seconds grace.

The second lift opened.

He stepped in and pressed the sixth floor button, to take him three floors up, and as he waited while the doors closed and it moved, he took out a cigarette and lit it. His expression was very bleak. The lift stopped and the doors opened. He stepped out swiftly and hurried along a passage towards a window which overlooked the street, then pressed the door-bell of the nearest flat. There was hardly a pause before footsteps sounded. An elderly man holding a book opened the door.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you," said Rollison, "but I need to make an urgent telephone call. I wonder if you'd be good enough to allow me to?"

"Why, glad to," the elderly man said, and stood aside; as Rollison stepped past him, he closed the door.

16

WARNING

Tex Brandt was still fascinated by the Trophy Wall. He would read a newspaper, put it down, and step across and study the articles on it; the rope, some chicken feathers and a cuckoo clock which cucked bullets seemed to hold his attention most. He would switch on the television, watch for ten minutes, and then with the singing or the dancing, the talking or the acting going on behind him, he would return to the trophies. He would open a book, pour himself a drink, light a cigarette; and keep looking at the wall.

Jolly came in to ask him if he would like some coffee.

"Sure, let's see how you can make it," Tex said, and stood up, drawn as if by magic to the wall. "You didn't tell me what that top hat is doing on the top of the heap," he went on. "Is that a bullet hole through the crown?"

"Yes, sir," said Jolly, "and the bullet actually tore away some of Mr. Rollison's hair, but did no harm. It was the first souvenir, and it amused Mr. Rollison to hang it on a nail in the wall. Then this collection somehow grew of itself. I confess" —Jolly was talkative, which showed that he also liked the Texan— "I was not enthusiastic at first, it had a melodramatic touch, if I may put it that way, and a kind of flamboyance. However, Mr. Rollison *is* a little melodramatic, and he also has a touch of the flamboyant, so it was in character."

"And now you approve?"

"You might say that I am the curator, sir."

"Is that so? Do you keep a catalogue?"

"Yes, sir. I have always felt that the time would come when an eminent biographer would like to write Mr. Rollison's life story, and I felt that the least I could do was to keep a brief, detailed account of each of the *causes célèbres* which are indicated here."

"I'd sure like to see that catalogue."

"I will have to obtain Mr. Rollison's permission," Jolly declared. "He is a little reluctant to allow anyone but his closest friends to see it."

"So he's not so flamboyant after all," observed Brandt. He looked at his watch. "It's after eleven, I wonder how much longer he'll be?"

Then the telephone bell rang.

"With your permission I will answer it here, sir."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Now the Texan seemed as fascinated by Jolly, who was so doleful looking in repose, so full of vitality when talking about the Toff.

"This is Mr. Richard Rollison's residence." There was a brief pause, and then Jolly's eyes kindled. "Yes, sir, he is still here . . . What is that, sir?" Jolly glanced at the American, and his manner changed noticeably. He listened intently, said: "At once, sir," and put down the receiver quickly.

“You are to leave immediately by the roof,” he told Brandt. “The police are on their way to arrest you. This way, if you please.”

Jolly did not utter another word, showed no sign of surprise or alarm, just turned and hurried out of the room, with the Texan close behind him. Yet Tex cast a last glance at the Trophy Wall. Jolly led the way along a narrow passage and into a spotless kitchen, where chromium and tiles seemed to live together harmoniously. He opened a door which led to another door, and then said: “Excuse me, sir, we had better put out the light.” He flicked a switch, and everything went into darkness. He opened the outer door, and the grey light of night filtered in.

“Step very cautiously here,” he cautioned. “It’s an iron fire escape.”

“Sure.” Tex’s voice barely disturbed the quiet.

There was a faint sound, like an echo, as they stepped on to the iron platform. The outline of the steps leading downwards showed clearly, and below there was a pale courtyard. A shadow which might be the figure of a man was stationary at one corner.

Tex followed Jolly closely, to the wall.

“There are iron rungs here, sir. If you climb up them you will reach the roof of the building. The best way to turn at the top is to the left. It is a light night, and you will have no difficulty in seeing where you are going. The houses are all terraced, but the ninth one along has a very narrow gap. You will find more rungs, like these, leading down from the roof at this side of the gap, and leading to the fire escape. Anyone watching this house will be behind you then, and you need only take reasonable precautions to get away.”

The Texan whispered: “Sure, I understand.”

“When you reach the ground, you will find the narrow gap between the houses on your right. Take that, sir. Turn left, and then left again. It will bring you into Piccadilly Circus, with which I imagine you are familiar.”

“Sure, I know Piccadilly Circus,” said Tex, in a strangely subdued voice; it was not simply that he was whispering, it was as if he hardly knew how to find words. “Let me make sure I have it right. I turn left at the top, I climb down at the house this side of the gap, I go into the gap, I turn left and left again, and I’m right in Piccadilly.”

“That’s right,, sir.”

“Fine,” said Tex, with a little more vigour. “Jolly, will you tell me one thing?”

“If I can, sir.”

“Why is Mr. Rollison doing this for me?”

“I have no doubt at all that it will serve an admirable purpose, sir.”

“Which means you don’t know,” said Tex. “I guess I don’t know, either.” He took Jolly’s hand. “Tell him I think he’s a mighty fine guy, will you?”

“I will, sir.”

Now Tex gripped his shoulder, and there was fierceness in his whispered words.

"I want him to get that message verbatim. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir. In your opinion, Mr. Rollison is a mighty fine guy."

Tex choked back a laugh.

He turned, and began to climb up the iron rungs, going very cautiously first, but much faster before he reached the top. Jolly waited until he had disappeared, and marvelled that he hardly showed himself against the grey sky; it was unlikely that he would have been seen from the ground, even if someone had been watching all the time.

Jolly went back into the flat, closed both doors, and turned on the light. Then he went into the kitchen, and began to get the morning tea-tray ready. He was putting the finishing touches to it when the telephone bell rang. He moved to an extension which was just outside the kitchen door, and lifted the receiver.

"This is Mr. Richard Rollison's residence."

A man said: "I want to speak to Mr. William Brandt, sir," in a very clearly defined southern drawl; so much of a drawl that it seemed almost affected. This was the American who had called before, and the drawl was very different from Brandt's.

"I'm sorry, I know no one of that name," lied Jolly.

"What did you say, sir?" The caller made the 'sir' sound like 'suh' and there was a sharper note in his voice.

Jolly repeated the answer.

"You must have made a mistake," the American said. "I was talking to Mr. Brandt only this afternoon. He told me that he was staying at the apartment of an English gentleman, and that the gentleman's name was Rollison. If you care to hold on a moment, I'll spell that out to you."

"There is no need I assure you," Jolly said. "This *is* Mr. Rollison's residence, and I am Mr. Rollison's personal attendant, but I do not know a Mr. Brandt."

"That *so* ?" The man sounded astonished.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Rollison may be able to help you, but I don't think he is likely to be in tonight. He might be in tomorrow morning. Would you care to leave a telephone number, so that he is able to get in touch with you?"

"I guess I'll call him again," said the American, and rang off.

Jolly put the receiver down quietly, went back and finished the tea-tray, and then went to his own bed-sitting room, which was small but extremely well-furnished, and poured himself a whisky and soda; he used plenty of soda. He kept listening for sounds at the front door, but for a long time there was silence. Then he heard the expected footsteps, jumped up, and hurried to the door. He opened it before Rollison had his key out, and stood aside.

Rollison was with Grice, whom Jolly knew well.

"Hallo, Jolly," Rollison said. "Not in bed yet?"

"I was about to retire, sir."

"I'll have a look round before you do," said Grice, and as he spoke two plain-clothes men came up the stairs; it was obvious to Jolly that he was not doing this by halves. Grice looked grim, almost angry. He strode into the big

room, ignored the Trophy Wall, then went into the spare room, next the kitchen, finally the bathrooms and Rollison's bedroom.

Rollison and Jolly were together in the large room when he came striding in.

"Come on," he barked. "Where is he?"

"If you mean Mr. Brandt, sir, he left some time ago," Jolly answered promptly. "I understand that he was to stay here until Mr. Rollison returned, but he said that he had some urgent task to perform, and that he would call or telephone in the morning. If I'd known he should have been detained, sir, I would have done my best."

Grice said harshly: "Rolly, you're a damned fool. That man's almost certainly a killer. Where is he?"

Rollison was meek.

"You heard what Jolly said, Bill."

"If anyone else gets killed in this affair, you'll be to blame," Grice said. Jolly had seldom seen him nearer to losing his temper. "Now, let's have the truth. How much do you know about this business? What's the secret of Selby Farm?"

"If I knew that, I'd be on top of the world," Rollison replied quite honestly. "Bill, I didn't know a thing about all this until this morning. I know less than you. I told Brandt to come here, and he came, but he probably got worried because I was away so long."

"You mean you telephoned him and told him to climb over the roof," said Grice. "I ought to take you to the Yard for assaulting a police officer."

"In a lift? With no witnesses? And when the so-called assailant was waiting downstairs for you, all ready to come quietly?" asked Rollison. "Think again, Bill."

"Rolly," said Grice, softly now, "you're the man who ought to have second thoughts. The man named William, alias Tex Brandt, is a killer. I had that information over the radio telephone from New York this morning. That's why I took so much trouble to make sure he couldn't get away. That's why I was going to hold him tonight. He's wanted for several murders in America. He calls himself an inquiry agent, and once upon a time he had a licence, but he lost that when he first went to jail. He missed the electric chair by a hair's-breadth. That's the man you've befriended; that's the man you've allowed to escape."

It was almost the only time Jolly could remember seeing his employer look really taken aback. That showed in Rollison's expression, in his eyes, in the way his mouth went slack. He recovered quickly, but that didn't alter the fact that Grice had really shaken him.

Grice said: "I'll let you stay here for the night because I hope he'll try to get in touch with you. If he does, I want the Yard to know at once. Don't take any more chances, because you might be the next one to get a knife between your ribs."

Grice turned away, and went out, taking his two men with him.

“Jolly,” said Rollison, very quietly, “you’re slipping.”

Jolly stood looking at him, as he in turn looked at the Trophy Wall.

“I’m extremely sorry, sir.”

“You should keep a closer eye on me. You should have told me I was due for retirement months ago. All these souvenirs, and not another to add.”

“I shouldn’t be too despondent, sir.”

“You wouldn’t, but I think I should,” said Rollison. “I have been too slow and too late from the beginning of this affair, and—” he broke off and smiled faintly; and then actually chuckled. “Well, I didn’t exactly crawl this morning, but ever since then I’ve been running after suspects, peeking through keyholes, and generally trailing my coat. I haven’t answered the main questions either. Why has M.M.M. changed so remarkably? And why did two people try to kill him ? I’m beginning to see daylight—I *think*. But I really ought to take a nice long holiday. Yes,” he went on, his eyes kindling again, “a nice long holiday, perhaps down on a farm. How does it sound, Jolly?”

“I think I ought to stay here, sir.”

“You’re probably right. Apart from getting our electric chair candidate away, have you done anything tonight?”

“Very little, sir. There was one message.” Jolly reported on the American’s second call, and then added: “I think you would be wise to stay here until hearing from Mr. Grice in the morning. If you leave now, then it might really exasperate him, and there is no point in being incarcerated, is there ? It wouldn’t help anyone.”

17

DOWN ON THE FARM

"No," agreed Rollison, slowly, "it wouldn't do anyone any good if I were to be what you call incarcerated, Jolly, but have you weighed up all the pros and cons?" He sounded solemn and yet somehow more cheerful.

"I think so, sir."

"You forget the vigour with which I poked my elbow into Grice's ribs."

"That would annoy him for the moment, but he is the last person in the world to bear a grudge. Whatever else," added Jolly sententiously, "Mr. Grice knows that whatever you do is for the best, and he would not hold anything you did against you for long."

"He has bosses," observed Rollison.

"But he also has the power of discretion."

"Jolly," said Rollison, "I must rehabilitate myself. It must not be said that the pace of events outran me. I will not listen to reason. Come into my room, will you?" He led the way, a gleam in his eyes, and Jolly followed sedately, keeping a straight face when Rollison opened the wardrobe and took out a strangely ragged suit: it was a remarkable one, in that although it was clean, it looked filthy. Jolly took this from him and laid it out as carefully as if it had been the civil uniform for a royal garden party. As Rollison unfastened his collar and tie and began to slide out of his clothes, Jolly brought other things from the inner recesses of the wardrobe. Among these were thick, heavy shoes, a cloth cap which looked as if it had come from a stevedore who had been working on a collier, a white silk scarf and a striped shirt of the kind commonly bought at the smaller departmental stores. "You see," went on Rollison, changing into these clothes dexterously, "Grice is not only annoyed, but he is sure that Tex Brandt is the murderer. He has good reason to be sure. He'll be equally positive that I know all about Brandt's wickedness, and yet want Brandt free to carry out some perfidious purpose of my own. To stop me, he'll shop me, and probably pop me in clink."

"As you have made up your mind, sir, there is little point in making alternative suggestions," Jolly said mildly. "May I ask where you are going?"

"No. You can even forget what I burbled just now. If Grice comes and wants to know, you can put your hand on your heart and say you know nothing. That might keep you out of quod, too. If Miss Selby, Mr. Selby or Mr. Morne call or telephone, you haven't the faintest idea where I am, or where Tex Brandt is."

"Very good, sir."

"Okay," said Rollison, and then he stooped down, opened a drawer which had been locked, and did a remarkable thing. Inside this box were two knives, attached to steel clasps. One he clipped round his right forearm, the

other round his left leg, just above the calf. Had he made any fuss about this it would have been melodramatic, but he took it all for granted, and Jolly did exactly the same.

From the box Rollison also took what looked like a palm gun, not much larger than a pocket watch, and a small phial of slugs or pellets.

"And to think there was a day when I preferred to use lethal bullets," he murmured, almost blithely.

"I'm not sure that you wouldn't be wiser to have some now," Jolly said.

"The gentlemen having killed twice and ruthlessly," mused Rollison. "Yes. But I'll make the cutlery and the gas pistol do, I think."

"I wish you would tell me where you are going and what you propose to do," said Jolly, and he managed to sound indifferent, although his anxiety crept through. "If you should need any assistance, I might be able to procure it."

"Yes. I'll telephone. This is a one-man job," declared Rollison, "and if I'm right, even half a man would be enough to do it." There was a glint in his eyes, and evidence of a remarkable change in the last ten minutes: as if he had lost ten years, and full youth was his again. "I'd better nip off before Grice arrives. Behave very nicely with him, and don't aggravate the situation."

"Be sure I won't, sir."

Rollison left the flat by the same way as the Texan, moving much more quickly. He could not be sure whether the roof was watched now: he was sure that no one followed him when he reached the ground again, and then strode towards Piccadilly. No one who knew Rollison would have dreamed that the big, burly man, with the patched clothes and the cloth cap pulled low over his eyes, was the Toff in person.

It was not surprising that he travelled first by Tube to the East End of London, for that was where he obviously belonged.

Old Smith sat in the kitchen of Selby Farm, staring at the red glow of the wood fire. He was warm in front and cold behind, but he hadn't stirred for the past half hour, and it looked as if he was asleep.

Now and again, embers settled.

Outside, he knew, there was a policeman patrolling the farmhouse garden. Now and again he passed so near the window that his footsteps were clearly audible. Apart from that, there was no sound. The blinds were down, for Old Smith had been frightened of burglars for many years, and gave no one a chance to glance inside and see his loneliness.

Occasionally his lips twisted in what might have been a smile, and as easily a spasm of indigestion.

Suddenly, he got up, went out of the kitchen into the big front room, went to the window, moved the blind a fraction, and peered out. He could see a light in the sky, and knew that car headlamps were still on near the cottage, with the proof that the police were still there. He let the blind fall and returned to his chair, dropped heavily into it, and then took out a large

silver watch from his fob pocket, thumbed the glass, and peered at the hands. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning.

He yawned.

Then he heard a creak of sound and darted a suspicious glance towards the ceiling. The creak wasn't repeated. He continued to glare upwards until his head drooped, and his chin almost touched his chest. His breathing was heavy and rasping, now and again he snored.

He was not aware of the man who appeared in the doorway, silent as a wraith but nothing like a wraith to look at. In fact he looked like an East End dock worker who had lost his way. He stared at the old man's bowed head and bent back, and smiled faintly at the snoring. He stepped closer, taking the palm gun out of his pocket as he did so.

He stood looking down at Old Smith, who had been so adamant about leaving Selby Farm.

"Now why don't you want to leave, Smithy?" asked Rollison, and continued to stare at the old man's head. He asked the question silently, and the only sound was Smith's breathing. The night was silent, too. Rollison had got in at a window. He had seen a policeman in the garden, but the man had been easy to evade. In the morning he would get into trouble from Keen or Bishop, but he would get over that.

Rollison moved the palm gun until it was just at the side of Smith's face, and pressed the trigger gently. There was scarcely a hiss of sound, and no more vapour than there would have been from an atomiser. The old man paused in his breathing once, and after that appeared to breathe steadily and silently.

Rollison put the gun back into his pocket.

He stepped to the back door, and saw that the huge key had been turned in it, and that it was bolted and chained. With extreme care, he drew bolts and pulled the chain out, then turned the key; and the turning made the greatest sound. He opened the door a fraction and listened, but saw no sign of the patrolling policeman, nor did he hear him. He stepped into the garden, and drew the door to behind him, without closing it. He looked towards the cottage. No lights showed above the trees now, for except for a guard back and front, much more thorough than the guard at the farm, no police were there.

Footsteps sounded.

Rollison waited in the dark shadows. The policeman, in plain clothes, was angled for a moment against the sky. He drew nearer, glanced at the door, but did not think of trying it or of going nearer.

He passed, slowly.

Rollison went back inside, hurried to the old man, and lifted him bodily; Smith did not stir or make a sound, he was in a drugged sleep now. Rollison took him outside and across the farmyard with its earthy and its animal smells. Just behind a gate in a nearby field there was a rustle of sound.

"That you, Mr. Ar?" a man inquired in a rich Cockney voice.

"Hallo, Sam," said Rollison. "How would you like to be a farmer?"

"Not so-and-so likely, the smell's more'n enough for me," said the man named Sam. "I'll buy me eggs from the shop, ta. Got 'im?"

"Yes. Take him and look after him well, he might be precious," Rollison said. "You know where to go with him."

"Everything's okay, Mr. Ar," said the man named Sam, and another man appeared by his side and echoed: "Sure, it's okay." Rollison handed over the unconscious man, and then stood and watched the two men from London's East End as they carried Smith on a chair which they made with their arms, until the strange little group disappeared from his sight.

Ten minutes afterwards, some distance off, a car engine started up, whined for a few moments, and then moved off; but oddly, there was no light in the sky to show the beam of headlights.

Rollison turned back to the garden. The policeman was on the way round again, and this time smoking a cigarette; the smell of tobacco smoke came temptingly, but Rollison resisted temptation, and waited until the man was round the nearest corner. Soon he went to the kitchen, locked up as securely as Old Smith, then turned out the oil lamp and, using a torch, went up the narrow stairs. He had seen the condition of the farmhouse during the day, and knew that it was messy enough, but he pulled off his boots, loosened his collar and tie, then sat down in an old armchair, and closed his eyes.

"Six o'clock should be early enough," he said in a soft whisper. "I'll wake at six."

Soon, he was asleep.

He slept with the door open, and the knowledge that he would wake at the slightest sound, for the years had taught him how to be asleep one moment, and wide awake the next. No sound disturbed him. At two minutes to six by the watch on his wrist, he began to stir, his eyelids flickered, and he moistened his lips. At one minute past six he opened his eyes wide and stared about him: then grinned.

"I'll bet there's no hot water," he said, and pushed back a blanket he'd pulled over him, and got up. He washed in cold water, but made no attempt to shave. He put a kettle on the oil stove downstairs, and then went into Smith's room and examined his wardrobe. It wasn't extensive, but there were two jackets and three pairs of breeches. He found the breeches a little too big round the waist but the Norfolk jacket wasn't a bad fit. He took off his scarf, but did not put on a collar and tie: Old Smith didn't wear one.

Smith's shoes were much too small for Rollison.

"Mine'll have to do," he said aloud, and then pulled his own cap over his head, for he could not persuade himself to wear the old man's. By the time he had finished, the kettle was singing downstairs. He made himself tea, found biscuits and ate two, and then went into the big room. He pulled the blinds up sufficient to allow light in, but not to permit anyone to see inside, and then he began to search the room.

A squad of police would not have been more thorough.

He moved furniture and pictures, stepped inside the huge fireplace, put

his head up the chimney, and tapped the inside walls. He felt every wall for loose bricks or loose plaster, and tapped the floor of the fireplace, too. Everything seemed solid. He went down on his knees and tested the floorboards, seeking any evidence that one had been taken up lately. He found none. He studied the furniture, trying to judge if any had a false drawer, or other secret hiding-place. All this took him over forty minutes, and at the end of it he was frowning.

"That's one blank," he said *sotto voce,* and then went into the kitchen and did exactly the same thing.

He found nothing.

He searched the pantries and the cupboards, then turned his attention to the stairs. There was a narrow cupboard underneath them, but it contained only a few old boxes and old clothes. The floor was solid, and looked as if the boards had been undisturbed since they'd been laid, over a hundred years ago.

"Two blanks," he said, a little less cheerfully, as he went upstairs.

At half-past seven he had finished his search of the farmhouse, and had found nothing to explain the sensational interest in it. He was hungry as well as disappointed when he went downstairs. He drew the blinds a little, so that anyone who wanted to see inside would have to come close to each window, and then went into the kitchen, opened the back door, and hobbled out, shoulders bent and head towards the ground. A man called: "Good morning, Smith."

"'Morn'n," Rollison grunted, without looking up. He shuffled across to the hen coops and unfastened them, and was on his way back when the first hen was sprawling about the muddy yard. The policeman who had spoken came no nearer. Rollison went back into the kitchen and closed the door. Out of the line of vision of anyone at the window, he straightened up, and raided the larder. There were plenty of eggs, a piece of bacon, bread, butter, everything he wanted. He found the frying slow on the oil stove, but eggs and bacon as succulent as Jolly's at his best. The bread was stale and chewy, and he missed toast. He brewed strong tea, pondering the mystery all the time, and wondered how long it would be before someone called.

He couldn't face the scrutiny of anyone who knew Smith, or even of anyone who knew that he was old, but the half-drawn blinds made it so gloomy in here that he might get away with a brief encounter.

One question was on his mind all the time. If the value of Selby Farm wasn't in the farmhouse, where was it?

He was fooling himself, of course; there was no way of being sure that he'd searched everywhere. The roof might hold the secret. If he took up the floorboards in any room he might find what he wanted. That was like asking for the moon.

He wondered where Brandt was; who was the American who had telephoned the previous night; what Grice was thinking, and more important, what he was planning to do? He wondered how well Gillian had slept, and where she was now; and whether she was with her brother and

M.M.M. Peculiar character, Montagu Montmorency Morne. Rollison was picturing M.M.M. telling him that he wasn't wanted, when he heard the sound of a car engine. He hurried to the front room to peer out, and saw Morne's car. Getting out of it was Gillian, and at the wheel was M.M.M. himself.

The police wouldn't be far behind.

18

FORLORN HOPE?

Rollison would not be able to fool Morne, and dare not let the girl come face to face with him. He saw Gillian's pale face, and guessed from the brightness of her eyes that she hadn't slept much. M.M.M. looked pale and tired, too. He was getting out of the car clumsily, and Rollison thought back to the accident, and wondered whether the change in him had started from the time of that dread happening.

Gillian had come on ahead, and was at the door and out of Rollison's sight. She knocked. Odd; one would have expected her to go to the back entrance for she knew Smith well enough. She knocked again, as M.M.M. called out: "The old devil will pretend he can't hear. Go round to the back."

"He won't talk to me if I do, he's always ordered me to knock at the front door."

"*Ordered* you," choked M.M.M.

"It isn't any use getting bad tempered or blinking at facts," said Gillian, in a voice which suggested that she would easily get out of patience. She knocked again, and this time Rollison stepped towards the door, banging against a chair to make sure that Gillian knew he was coming. This door was bolted. He opened it a fraction, but left it on the chain. He could just see the girl, as he stood on one side. She seemed to expect to be kept waiting there, and said quite patiently: "Mr. Smith, please open the door. I want to talk to you."

Rollison said in a harsh, sour voice: "Well, ee can't."

"Please open the door," said Gillian, with a pleading note in her tone. "I've got to talk to you."

"I've told you I'll never step outside this house while I'm alive, when I'm dead ee can carry me out," Rollison said, mumbling, and hoping that it sounded like Old Smith talking; certainly the girl seemed to suspect nothing amiss.

"You've got to be reasonable," she said, and it was even more obvious that desperation and fear had driven her here. "My brother's in grave danger, and—"

"It's naught to do with me."

"Mr. Smith, please listen to me!"

"I've listened to the nonsense from you and your good- for-nothing brother for too long already. Why don't you go and talk to someone who wants to hear from you?"

"You're going to open that door and you're going to listen to me," Gillian cried, and Rollison had never heard her more shrill, was glad that anger had broken through. "Don't stand there behaving as if you were a lunatic. Alan's in deadly danger, and you've got to help him. Get that into your head."

A murmur from outside sounded like M.M.M. saying: “That’s better.”

Rollison had to slam the door and refuse to talk any more, or else make some kind of a gesture. He wanted to know what Gillian had to say, and there seemed only one way of finding out.

He mumbled: “Say what you have to say, I’ll listen to you,” but he didn’t open the door, and leaned back against a chair so that Gillian couldn’t possibly see him. He wondered what she felt like, standing so close to the door and yet shut out; and what M.M.M. was doing; and whether the police were within earshot.

He could hear the girl’s heavy breathing, as if she was trying to regain her temper.

“Please listen very carefully,” she said, at last. “My brother has been threatened with murder – do you understand, *murder* – unless I sell this farm with vacant possession. You must leave here, Mr. Smith. We will pay you anything you ask. We will even buy you another farmhouse if you want it, but you must leave here.”

“I will, when I’m dead,” Rollison said harshly. “Don’t come whining to me with a lot of lies.”

“But they’re not lies! Alan told me this last night. Mr. Morne and I left him in a drugged sleep, hiding—hiding from his enemies.” How true was that? “Mr. Smith,” I’ve come to beg you to do what I ask. I’ll give you everything I possess, if only you’ll leave the farm.”

Rollison didn’t answer.

M.M.M. said roughly: “It’s no use banging your head against a brick wall. If I could get in there I’d knock some sense into him.”

The girl was almost in tears.

“Mr. Smith, you mustn’t stand out any longer. I can’t do more than I have.”

“Come back again tomorrow morning,” Rollison said abruptly, and tried to sound like Smith at his harshest. “I’ll think about it.”

He heard the girl draw in a sharp breath.

“But we can’t wait until morning!” M.M.M. protested angrily.

“Mr. Smith,” said Gillian, and there was a new note in her voice, as of hope replacing despair, “will you let me come and talk to you this evening? I’m so worried for Alan, and I daren’t leave it any longer.”

“A’right,” Rollison conceded. “I’ll expect you at six o’clock.”

She said: “Thank you,” in a way which was oddly touching, and then there was a pause before the sound of footsteps suggested that she was walking away. Rollison went closer to the door. She was moving towards the car, and M.M.M. had his arm round her, but not very tightly. It was easy to believe that Gillian was crying. It was as easy to believe that she felt sure that her brother’s life depended on getting the farm house empty, so that she could sell it. Whatever the police had said, whatever offers she had had of larger sums of money, and in spite of his, the Toff’s, advice, Gillian Selby would sell the farm in order to help her brother.

Did it make sense?

Who would buy it? Who would *dare* buy it, in view of what had happened? The police would be after a purchaser like a flash, and even if he was a cover for the principal, they would soon get to the real man.

Wouldn't they?

Rollison heard the car move off, with M.M.M. driving, and a moment afterwards saw two plain-clothes men step from a corner of the farmhouse; so the police had heard every word. One of them hurried across towards the cottage, which was cut off by the trees, as if to take his report to the policeman in charge.

The other went off on his patrolling again.

Rollison knew a little more. Alan Selby was still free, and it looked as if he would remain free for a while, to give his sister a chance to sell the property. Whoever had released him had taken a big chance – or else they had known their man, and were sure that Selby wouldn't fight.

Why wouldn't he?

Was he just a craven, or had someone been working on his nerves for a long time?

Rollison walked briskly to the kitchen and then into a big larder-like cupboard where he had seen a good set of carpenter's tools. He selected a screwdriver, a saw, a claw hammer, a brace and bit and some oil, and went back to the big front room. This time he really meant to search it so that there could be no possibility of a mistake.

But within half an hour, he felt sure that there was nothing buried under this floor.

He went moodily into the kitchen, sat in the old man's chair, lit a cigarette, and studied the floor there. He had seldom felt so nearly despondent, seldom been without a real clue. Usually he could guess at the truth, even if he couldn't prove it. Now his own mind as well as the circumstances seemed to be going round in circles.

He noticed the flagstoned floor was very uneven, especially in one corner. He looked at the wall, and saw that there was a pale patch in the plaster. He stared at this for some minutes, then stood up and went closer. About a dozen flagstones were raised higher than the others, and he scrutinised the little gaps where they were fitted together. These had been cemented in much more recently than most of those in the rest of the room. Rollison began to feel a glow of excitement, but before he did anything to the stones, he went to each window and looked out.

The plain-clothes policeman was standing and talking to a uniformed constable by the farmyard itself, and two white leghorns were pecking close to their feet. No one else was in sight. Rollison chose the longest and strongest screwdriver in the tool drawer, and then went to the raised flagstones. He dropped a cushion on the floor, because the cold stone was hard on his knees. He scraped at the cement pointing, but quickly realised that he would get no result that way: it didn't crumble at all.

He used the screwdriver as a cold chisel, and hammered the handle. He chipped a little away, but knew that he couldn't do that for too long,

because it would be heard outside. He spent five minutes at it, and had about half an inch clear of cement. Once he was able to get some leverage, he might get a stone up without too much difficulty.

He was sweating.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and then stood up, to ease his legs; and as he did so, he saw a shadow move in the doorway between here and the larders and pantries.

Pretending to notice nothing, he took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead more thoroughly. Then he stepped to the window, as if for a rest. He heard no sound except the crowing and cawing, the grunting and the movements of the farmyard. A pig appeared on the overgrown lawn at the back, as if it owned the place. Rollison stared at the glass of a picture near the window, watching the doorway.

A man appeared.

He was standing quite still. Rollison could not see what he looked like, could not even be sure that he was a big man, for the glass distorted. But he was there. He was moving, creeping forward. *Creeping.* Rollison could see as well as sense the stealthy approach, and he stood there very tense.

What did the man have in his mind?

That wasn't the only question, although it was the most urgent. How had he got there? A policeman wouldn't have allowed him to pass. In any case, back and front doors were locked and the windows were closed, too.

What did he have in his hand?

It looked like a piece of rope.

Why rope?

How had he come in?

And remember – he was coming stealthily upon the man he believed to be Old Smith, he couldn't suspect that it was anyone else.

Could he?

He was halfway across the room, and now Rollison knew that it was thick string in his hand; at closer quarters, the window glass did not distort so much. The man was still fearful of making a sound, and moved with remarkable silence. He was biggish, youngish, plumpish.

He held the string stretched between his hands, thrust out in a way which now made his purpose quite unmistakable. He was coming to twist that rope round 'Smith's' neck, and probably to pull it tight until the life was choked out of the old man.

Why?

How had he got in?

He was raising his hands, and it was obvious that he was coming in a moment. One leap, one twist, and he would expect an easy victim.

Rollison tensed himself, and then swung round.

He didn't know the man, and had never seen him before. He saw the hard face take on a look of disbelief, saw the big mouth gape open. The man leaped forward in a desperate effort, but something checked him, and he didn't finish his attempt. In the split second before Rollison hit him, he

looked as if he was seeing a ghost.

Rollison's fist caught him beneath the chin, and actually jolted him off his feet and sent him falling backwards. He struck the back of his head against the stone floor, and the dull thud told its own tale. He sagged, his head lolled to one side, and there was no pretence; he was unconscious.

But . . .

How had he got in?

19

WAY IN

Rollison stepped over the unconscious man, to the door, and then into the passage which served the larders and the pantries. He felt a draught which he hadn't noticed before. The obvious explanation was a forced window, of course, although all the windows here were small, and the man biggish, if not actually hefty.

Then Rollison stopped short.

The door of a fruit storage room was open, and he could smell the sharp, almost cidery smell of last year's apples; he had already seen some wrinkled and brown, on the shelves. He didn't see so many, now. Part of the shelving and part of the wall had swung open, so that there was a hidden doorway. It hinged at a corner, and it wasn't surprising that he had not found it.

Beyond, was darkness.

Rollison went back, made sure that the man was still unconscious, then came back. He stared down into a hole large enough even for a big man, and to three or four steps which looked as if they were made of cement. A fresh breeze was coming up the steps, nothing was dank and smelly. He went back again, found the string which the man had held out ready to strangle him, cut it in two, and bound the wrists and ankles. Now he had a little time to spare. He felt the choking excitement which often came with a discovery as he crouched down and entered the little staircase.

He shone his pencil torch.

There were cobwebs, and the walls were rather damp, but that was all. He had to bend his head very low so as to get along. Then the torch light fell on a wall in front of him, and revealed a corner. He turned this, and saw daylight coming from a hole about head height. He reached the hole and, moving with great care, hauled himself up so that he could see about him.

There were the trunks of trees, some undergrowth, some grass. This came up in the middle of the copse which made a kind of wall between farmhouse and cottage. No one else was near. The copse stretched for some distance, and anyone who kept his eyes open would be able to approach it from one side without being seen and, even with the leaves off the trees, reach the hole without being observed.

It was a discovery, but not the one which mattered most.

At one side of the entrance was a square of wood with earth and dead leaves on it. Rollison pulled this over the hole, and it left him in near darkness. He used his torch again, then found his way back to the storage cupboard and the door which he hadn't seen. He examined it, and saw that it could be opened from the inside as well as from the outside. He closed it, and went back to see if his prisoner had started to come round.

As he reached the kitchen, a trick of the light seemed to throw a shadow,

as of a knife, on the man's chest. Rollison had a bad moment, and his heart thumped. Then he drew nearer, and saw that there was no knife. He went down on one knee, and began to go through the man's pockets. His wallet contained only money; no driving licence, nothing to give his name away. He carried keys, two handkerchiefs, a comb, two studs, and a freshly opened packet of American *Camels,* with two books of matches. The cigarettes indicated nothing, but the book matches carried an American Motel slogan —

The Best in the South
Atlanta's Biggest Motel

Rollison stood up, the matches in his hand. They proved little, but they could mean a lot. A man with a southern accent threatened both him and Morne, and had telephoned Jolly, asking for Brandt, someone who knew that Rollison and Brandt were together on this; and here were matches, which looked fresh and new, as they would if they had been brought from the motel only a day or two ago.

Yet this man's clothes and appearance were as English as could be.

Rollison eased him over on his side, and examined the bruise at the back of his head. The skin was broken, but there was a little bleeding, nothing to suggest that it was too serious, but he was likely to be unconscious for some time longer.

Rollison went to the secret doorway, blocked it so that it couldn't be opened from the tunnel and stairs, and then went back to the flagstones. As he banged and chipped, his chief worry was the noise – if he kept it up too long, the police outside might come to see what the 'old man' was doing. The chance had to be taken. In ten minutes, enough cement was out of a crevice to push the end of the chisel down into the earth below, and Rollison began to lever at a slab.

The screwdriver steel bent, slowly, softly, uselessly.

Rollison drew back, unsmiling. He needed a spanner or a crowbar. He needed a lot of things –including news from outside – but above everything was the secret hidden beneath this floor.

The man behind him grunted.

Rollison turned to look at him. The man's eyes were flickering and his lips moving, as if they were very dry. Rollison fetched water in a cup and moistened his lips, and knew the moment that the other really came round; the sudden tension in the body and the hands, the abrupt tightening of the lips, told their own story. Then he tried to free his ankles and wrists but realised that he hadn't a chance. He opened his eyes wide and stared at Rollison's face, and the fear was deep in him.

"All you have to do is answer questions," Rollison said, and gave that a moment to sink in. "Who sent you to kill Smith?"

The man gulped, and his eyes showed the same kind of bewilderment as they had just before he had been knocked out.

"You—you're not Smith," he said hoarsely.

"You've got that right. Now don't waste time. Who sent you to kill Smith?"

The man began to breathe very hard.

"I didn't come to kill him. He wouldn't be any good if he was dead. I came to scare the wits out of him."

"That might sound good in court, but it doesn't make much impression on me," Rollison said sharply. "Who—"

The man cried: "You're the *Toff!*"

"That's right, but I don't feel like one at the moment. I feel like breaking your neck."

"Where—where's *Smith*?"

Rollison said: "All right, you really want trouble." He glanced round as if for a weapon, and the hammer was within reach. He stretched out for it, and the man's body seemed to give a convulsive leap.

"No, don't hit me, don't hit me!" There was the voice of fear. "I had to come and frighten Old Smith into doing what we wanted."

"Who are 'we'?"

"The—the boss and me."

"Who's the boss?"

"Will Brandt," said the helpless prisoner, who looked too terrified to lie. "Will Brandt's the boss, he wants the farm. After what's happened, he wants to buy it in Smith's name. That way he would be able to get it without trouble from the cops. Don't stare at me like that!" The man's voice rose so loudly that Rollison was afraid that he might be heard outside. "I tell you Brandt's the boss."

That made Grice right.

Which made the Toff wrong.

"Now you've started, keep it up," urged Rollison, and he weighed the hammer in his hand as if wondering whether it would be a good idea to use it after all. "You came to soften up Old Smith and make him buy the farm as a cover for Will Brandt of Abilene, Texas, is that it?"

The prisoner said: "If you know where he comes from, how much more do you know?"

"Enough to be sure when you're lying," Rollison replied. "Why is he so anxious to get the farm?"

He was watching the other closely, and saw the change in his expression. For a few minutes, fear had faded, as if he knew that there was nothing to fear provided he answered questions. Now, the fear was back. His prisoner spoke flatly, and it was obvious that he didn't expect to be believed.

"Will never told me," he said. "It's no use asking me that, you could break every bone in my body, and I wouldn't be able to tell you. All I know is that he's had a spy watching the Selbys, he knows every move they make. I just don't know anything else."

"You know other things. What's your name?"

"Freddie Littleton."

"Were you with Brandt in Atlanta recently?"

"Sure. We flew from New York three days ago."

"What were you doing with him?"

"Rollison," said the man who called himself Littleton, "he's a buyer of all kinds of jewellery, and he isn't particular where it comes from – and I know my way about. I've been going to and from America with jewels in my baggage for over a year now. Will gets a better price than I could get here."

"Do you steal them first?"

"Don't make me laugh," Littleton said, and he did in fact give a little giggle. "I'm on the receiving end. *I* don't take big chances. I buy from the bright boys in this country and take the stuff over to the States, and Will sells it there. That way I pick up five thou. a year and all expenses." He was sweating a little now, but the fear seemed to have gone for good: as if he thought that Rollison believed he did not know why Will wanted the farm so badly.

"I should think the police would like to know about you," Rollison murmured.

"I'll take my chance with the cops," Littleton said, quite perkily. "You can't prove anything against me."

"Freddie, you're quite a bright boy yourself. Be brighter. Where is Brandt now?"

"Don't ask me. He went off on his own yesterday morning, and called me by telephone a couple of hours ago. Maybe it's three hours now. He had some other people working for him, but they fell down on the job. So he told me to come down and soften up Old Smith, that's all I came here for."

"You told me that once before," said Rollison. "What about Lodwin and Charlie?"

"They were the other guys who fell down on the job," Littleton said.

"Is that why you killed them?" Rollison demanded.

He had never seen a man change so quickly; never seen horror spring into a pair of eyes as it did in Freddie Littleton's then. There was a long silence, so long that Rollison heard the ticking of his watch, as if it was willing the seconds away. Then Littleton said in a gusty voice: "So Brandt killed them both. He always said he would if they tried to muscle in. They thought they could get the stuff at the farm, and get away with it."

"What stuff?"

"*I* don't know, I didn't know anything about it. If it's a murder rap, I'd rather you took me straight to the cops and let me make a statement before they pick me up. Brandt always said he'd fix them. What did he use? A knife?"

Rollison seemed to see the smiling eyes of the tall Texan, and to feel the icy coldness of death.

He nodded.

"He was always playing around with that knife," Littleton said. "It

wouldn't surprise me to know he's used it plenty of times."

"Did he put anyone else on his black list?"

"Not to my knowledge," Littleton answered, and went on hurriedly: "Rollison, get me out of this. Send for the cops, and I'll come clean. I didn't know anything about the murders, I swear to that."

"You're not going to the police or anywhere yet," said Rollison, "you're going to stay here. Brandt may turn up if you're missing long enough, or he may send another stooge or two."

"What are you going to do with *me*?"

"You can have a snack, and then you're going to rest for the day," Rollison said.

He did not add that Charlie had been murdered while resting.

Twenty minutes later, Freddie Littleton was locked in a small upstairs room, and Rollison made another tour of the farmhouse. He satisfied himself that no one was here, checked that the door leading to the tunnel was still closed, and couldn't be opened except from the house, and then watched the patrolling policeman stroll past the front door. A moment afterwards, Rollison nipped out of the back door. No one else was in sight. He shuffled along and kept his shoulders bowed, in case someone was watching from some distance off, and then reached the spot from which he could see the cottage.

There were no cars outside, except Monty Morne's.

No policeman appeared to be there.

Smoke coiled upwards from a chimney, which suggested that Gillian and M.M.M. were there. Was Alan Selby? Had the police detained him when he had come round from that drugged sleep, or would they let him go free, and follow him in the hope that he would lead them to the murderers?

Rollison went back into the farmhouse, locked and bolted the back door, and then started work again on the flagstones, this time using a steel poker from the big room. It didn't bend so easily as the screwdriver, but the task still wasn't going to be easy. He wanted those flagstones up and the truth revealed before there were any more interruptions. It couldn't be long before the police came to question Smith, and to search, to try to find out why the farmhouse had become so valuable. Every lost minute might be vital.

He eased the flagstone up at last so that he could get his fingers under it at two places. He bent down, to get the greatest possible leverage with his arms, and heaved. He felt the great stone coming upwards. He exerted all the strength he had, and sweat began to trickle down his face, while the strain at arms and stomach seemed too great.

Then, he heard a banging on the front door.

20

CALLER ON A BIKE

Rollison had heard no one approach, was sure that there had been no car. He held the stone about four inches off the floor at one side, hesitated, and then heard more sharp rapping. It might be the police, this could be his cue to run. But he couldn't run unless he were positive that the police were here; he wanted to see what was buried under this floor.

He pushed the hammer underneath the stone with his foot, then gradually lowered the big slab; it would be easy enough to start again. As he went into the big room, shuffling noisily, he wiped his forehead, and was surprised that he felt clammy all over. He peered out from the side of the window, and saw no car, but also saw the uniformed policeman at the gate, watching but making no attempt to interfere.

He undid the chain.

"It's okay, Mr. Ar," a man said in whispered Cockney, "Mr. Jolly sent me. Let me in."

He was short and very thin, with a leathery face and very bright blue eyes; all of this was visible through the narrow opening of the door. After the first moment of tension, Rollison drew the chain out of its socket, but he kept his foot against the door in case there were others beside this man, whom he recognised as a friend of the Sam who had taken Old Smith away.

As the man came in, the wheel of his bicycle showed where it leaned against the wall. Then Rollison closed the door, and the little man grinned crookedly up at him.

"If I 'adn't've known, I wouldn't've recognised yer," he said, and thrust a small packet into Rollison's hand. "Mr. Jolly sent these, in case you run aht of your fav'rit fags."

Trust Jolly to feel quite sure where he had come!

"An' 'e give me a letter, said I wasn't to 'and it to noone but you in person," went on the Cockney, and looked about him. "Creepy sort 'o place you got dahn on the farm, ain't it?"

"You get used to it," Rollison said, and offered cigarettes from a nearly empty packet; he had left his case at the flat. "Quiet a minute, Lionel."

"Okay."

Jolly had realised whose help he had sought the previous night, of course; had assumed that he would go to the East End, where a certain Bill Ebbutt, who ran a boxing gymnasium as well as a pub, could always be relied on for help. Jolly had almost certainly persuaded Ebbutt to put him on to Sam who had come down here with a crony, and had taken Old Smith away. That much was easy to understand. But why had Jolly thought it essential to send a message?

Rollison unfolded the letter.

Jolly had written:

> "I think you should know at once, sir, that there is a warrant out for your arrest . . ."

Rollison caught his breath. Lionel looked at him through his lashes, and drew deeply on the cigarette. Someone walked along the path outside, and Rollison looked sharply towards the sound.

> "... I was told of this by Mr. Grice, who called at six-thirty this morning.
>
> "There is also a warrant out for William Brandt, who appears to be quite notorious in the United States. The newspapers have this story and are using it extensively, but as yet there is no public announcement of the warrant for you.
>
> "Mr. Grice made it clear that he believes you have been deceived by William Brandt, and says that it is absolutely essential for you to give yourself up and to make a statement explaining your association with the man. He says that in his considered opinion, the longer you leave it, the more dangerous will be your own position.
>
> "I understand that Mr. Alan Selby, who was detained for some hours, has been released, and also that Miss Selby and Mr. Morne are on their way to the cottage. I cannot be sure, but I have reason to believe that the police suspect that some attempt will be made to take possession of the farmhouse during the day, and the police are watching from a distance, ready to move in if that appears to be necessary.
>
> "If I am right in this surmise, I cannot too strongly urge you to leave.
>
> Respectfully as always, sir, Jolly.
>
> P.S. William Brandt telephoned me twice in the course of this letter, and each time said that he wanted to talk to you urgently. I refused to give him any information.

Rollison lowered the letter.

Lionel White moved across to the hearth and tossed the end of his cigarette into it.

"In a bit've a spot, aincha?" he inquired. "Just before I left there was a buzz that the busies were after you, serious this time. Anyfink I can do?"

"Did you see any police on the way here?" asked Rollison.

"Copper at the front, that's all."

If he had seen only the one man, then the other police were keeping out of sight, but there was no reason to doubt Jolly; it all added up. So did other

things. If the police were after him in earnest, they would soon have every newspaper in the country screaming the news.

"One ovver fing," went on Lionel, "Sam said the old geezer's okay."

"Where is he being kept ?"

"At the home of a pal of Sam's. Mr. Ebbutt didn't fink 'e ought to be kept at the pub or the gym."

"What's the address?"

"27, Russett Grove, Wapping."

"Thanks," Rollison said. "I may want to see him in a hurry, and I may want him brought nearer here. Get off, telephone Sam, tell him to be all ready to move if he gets a message, but to keep Smith where he is if he doesn't hear from me. Okay?"

"Sure, I've got it," said Lionel.

"And tell him to tell Jolly to send Will Brandt to the farm if he rings again. He can tell Brandt that I know the secret of the farm. That's urgent."

"I'll fix it quick," promised the little Cockney.

"And if the police pick you up on your way out, tell them you came from me to see Old Smith," Rollison said. "They'll swallow that." He saw Lionel grin as if he relished the trick. "Say I talked to you last night, near Ebbutt's place, and told you to come and try to make Old Smith explain why he wouldn't move from the farmhouse. All clear?"

"You don't get any slower, do you?" Lionel observed. "Anyfink else?"

"Yes. Tell them you were to report to Jolly by telephone. That's the lot."

"And do I 'ave to report that I found Mr. Smith in the best of 'ealth an' spirits?" demanded Lionel, and was chuckling when Rollison opened the door cautiously, and let him out. "Come by van as far's the village and push-biked from there," he said, "best way to avoid being noticed, I thought."

"You'll go a long way," Rollison told him.

He closed the door as he saw the uniformed policeman at the gate staring at the little Cockney. The policeman didn't stop Lionel White, who swung on to his bicycle and pedalled off at a good pace. Then the uniformed man plodded after him. In spite of the desperate urge to raise that flagstone and check what was buried there, Rollison watched the man until he disappeared.

He went to the back, and saw no one there.

"They're really going to make it easy for anyone to come here," he said. "I wonder where they're watching from?"

At least it was safer to go outside, provided he shuffled about with bowed shoulders. He dared to go further this time, and found a tool shed. He selected a fork, a spade and a short bar of iron, and went back to the farmhouse. It was a lovely morning, and when he closed the door it was like stepping into a funeral parlour. He locked and bolted it again, and then began work. The iron bar was exactly the lever that he needed. It was the work only of a few minutes to lever the flagstone up, then send it falling to one side. It clattered noisily, and rumbled for a long time. With the better tools, Rollison prised up three more stones, and so laid bare about two

square yards of dark earth, dusted with sand and cement.

Now he felt a surge of excitement.

He prodded the earth, and it was fairly easy to pierce with the fork. He dug it over quickly, then began to use the spade, shifting earth to one side; it was heavy and nearly black. He reminded himself that he couldn't be sure that he had found the secret of the farmhouse; that floor might have been repaired.

Would he find jewels?

Or would he find a body?

He had a hole nearly three feet deep, and a half an hour later was sweating and tired from the unusual exercise. Every time he drove the spade in, the earth seemed to be heavier and more difficult, and there was clay here. He was standing in the hole, and felt like a grave-digger, but by far the worst thing was the sense of failure and frustration. No one would go any deeper than this, *and* re-pave that floor. There was a limit to precautions.

He drove the spade in again.

It struck something hard.

Thought of everything but the discovery faded from Rollison's mind. He tried several times, always with the same result. He cleared the soil away slowly and carefully, determined not to let himself be too excited. Odd, how excitement affected him in this case.

There was a metal box.

It was like coming upon hidden treasure, and easy to picture the box with the lid thrown back, gold and jewels heaped inside. They wouldn't be, of course, this wouldn't be so obvious.

He cleared soil away from two sides of the box. At least it wasn't large enough for a coffin. He cleared the third side, saw the hinges, and was able to study the box more carefully. It was fitted with thick hinges and a clasp, and was more than a metal box; it was a Landon safe, quite small and very nearly impregnable. If he worked on this for the rest of the day he wouldn't be able to open it. To blow it open he needed T.N.T. and to cut it open, an oxyacetylene cutter. In spite of that fresh disappointment, he cleared all the earth away, so that the safe stood like a little tomb, the sole result of an excavation.

He left it, pushed the loose earth as far into a corner as he could, and then went into the scullery and put on a kettle, for hot water; now he really needed a wash. He washed his hands in cold water, rummaged round, and found that Old Smith kept some beer and whisky in a cupboard in the big room. He felt like a whisky, and didn't drown it. He felt a strange sense of anti-climax, for when the police saw Brandt come here, they would move in. At least he would have the satisfaction of knowing that he had lured Brandt into their hands.

He didn't like it.

He would probably be wise to get a message to the police before Brandt arrived, so that it wouldn't look as if they had caught him and Brandt

together with the boodle.

It would be two hours at least before Brandt could get here, even if he did what he was told; but anyone who wanted the contents of that safe as badly as Tex Brandt would almost certainly take a chance in coming.

There was more than the Brandt angle, though: there was the 'rival' apparently working through Selby, and using Gillian and M.M.M. to help. Had Tex built up that rival and also his client? Did it make sense that Tex should first employ and then murder Lodwin and Charlie Habden ?

And what of Gillian and M.M.M.? They might be patient enough to wait until six o'clock for the promised interview from Old Smith, but no one would want to wait long for the sake of it.

"If I were in their shoes, what would I do?" asked Rollison of himself, as he washed with thick lather from the hot water, and then towelled vigorously. It was odd to feel the stubble on his cheeks, and to see the white bits of the towel sticking to it.

It was nearly twelve o'clock, and he could see the brightness of the sun at the sides of the windows. He looked out of each of the top floor windows, and saw no sign of anyone; the policeman had certainly been moved. He checked all the windows to make sure they were securely fastened, and also checked the doors.

He went upstairs to do the same thing, and looked in at Littleton, lying bound hand and foot on the narrow bed.

He stood over the man.

"Just refresh your memory," he said, mildly. "Did Brandt threaten to kill anyone else?"

Littleton tried to meet his eyes, but couldn't.

"You said you'd come clean, remember?" Rollison reminded him, in a harder voice. "But make it really clean. Who else was on his list?"

In a hoarse voice, Littleton said: "The Selbys, if they wouldn't play. He fixed the kidnapping of Alan Selby, they're all ready to sell now – I fixed that myself. If I were you, I'd look after the Selbys before I did anything else."

Rollison went to the apple storage room, opened the secret door, and crept inside. He switched on his torch, then closed the door behind him. He went along, crouching until he saw the haze of daylight, and stood beneath the opening, listening.

He heard the ordinary sounds of the wooded land; birds calling, small animals rustling, and also heard the drone of an aeroplane. He pushed the cover aside, very cautiously, and looked out. The police might have stationed a man inside this copse of trees, making it as dangerous a place as there could be.

He saw no one.

He hoisted himself up and onto the ground, pushed back the camouflaged cover, looked round to make sure that he could find the spot again, and slashed a sapling which stood close to some brambles, not far from a fallen

birch tree, victim of a storm. The sun was bright against the leaves above him, and he could get his direction from that. Still moving very cautiously, he went towards the cottage. Soon, he was close to the edge of the trees, and here was the moment of greatest danger.

He could see the cottage, the back garden, the smoke – and a man on the roof of the cottage, squatting by the chimney stack, with a pair of binoculars at his eyes. He was watching the farmhouse, and the last place he would look for marauders would be in the copse. But he might glance down. Rollison moved round a little, so that the chimney stack hid him from the watching policeman, and studied the nearby fields and hedges, wondering where other policemen were.

He saw none.

He was fifty yards from the cottage, but as he stepped out of the cover of the trees, he felt as if a thousand eyes were watching him. There was grass land right up to the edge of the drive, so he made no sound.

It was easier than he had realised to get to and from the cottage.

Should he go and see Gillian?

The thought was hardly in his mind when he saw her coming this way.

21

THE COTTAGE AGAIN

]The small kitchen of the cottage was spick-and-span. There was an appetising smell of stewing meat, and a large saucepan was on the big oil stove, steam rising from it, and a slight bubbling sound audible all the time.

M.M.M. was standing by the window and looking out, his whole attitude apparently one of utter dejection. Alan Selby was sitting on the arm of a chair, smoking, staring at M.M.M.'s back. Alan looked much more rested, as if he had slept well, and as if there was an easing of the load on his mind. Gillian thrust open the door which led from the foot of the stairs, and entered the big room.

She stopped.

"Monty, it's no use standing there and moping," she said with asperity. "We've got to wait until six o'clock and pray that Old Smith will change his mind. Until then, there isn't a thing we can do."

M.M.M. looked at her morosely.

"I think it's just a stall," he growled. "He'll never get out, and until he does there's this danger hanging over us. Gillian, why don't you do what I advised? Sell to the first one who makes an offer, and let *him* deal with Old Smith. That way you'll be out of danger, the danger's only here because you own the damned house."

Alan Selby stood up briskly.

"I think you're wrong. I think the old idiot realises that he's got to give way at last, but he won't do it easily. When he's agreed to go, I can finish this deal with the man Littleton."

"You seem to think that because these swine make you promises, they'll keep them," M.M.M. said acidly. "Well, I don't think anyone will keep promises. I think you've got to sell out – and I've told you I think you ought to sell to Old Smith."

"You're just being silly," Gillian said. "Old Smith couldn't find enough money to buy the cottage, never mind the farmhouse."

"He could get a mortgage, you'd get your money, and then the swine who want the farmhouse would be forced to deal with him," said M.M.M. "It's so obvious it sticks out a mile. You ought to go over again and ask him if he *will* buy it from you. And he may not be so near the poorhouse as you think, some of these old peasant types have been putting money away for most of their lives. The least you can do is try it. If he owns the place, then Littleton and Brandt will have to deal with him, and you two will be in the clear."

"If we can get Smith out, and sell ourselves, we'll get a much better price," said Alan, still quite briskly. "I think we ought to hold out for as long as we can. Now I've had a chance to look at the whole situation clearly, I'm sure that's the right thing to do. The police will make sure that we don't run

into any more danger. I didn't realise that until I had a talk with the policeman Grice. I wish to heaven I'd talked to the police before, instead of being so scared."

"You didn't tell the police because they threatened me," said Gillian quietly. "It's no use blaming yourself, Alan. And I'm sure Alan's right, Monty. We've been through a great deal, and it seems absurd to lose a small fortune because we can't hold out for another few hours."

"Gillian," M.M.M. said in a strangled voice, "I'm asking you for the last time to go and see Smith and offer to *sell* him the house, as you've positively got to get rid of it. That way, he'll be in trouble, and you won't. Before you say no again, remember that we've been lucky so far – but two people have been killed. Or had you forgotten that? There have been two murders, and there might easily be more. It's red-hot. And you may not believe it, but I don't want you to die. In case you've forgotten another thing, I love you. I've loved you for a long time. I know you've never cared a hoot for me. After I lost my leg you softened a bit, and felt almost sorry enough for me to marry me, but thank God I didn't let myself take advantage of that. Now, I'm telling you that I'm as desperately in love with you as ever – and I don't want you to run another risk. Go and see Smith. Offer to sell him the house. There's no other safe thing to do."

Alan, behind him, was shaking his head at his sister.

Gillian did not appear to notice that. Her expression was very much softer, and there was a glow in her eyes such as Rollison had seen, quite unexpectedly, when she had talked to Tex Brandt.

"All right, Monty, I'll go over and see him right away."

"If you sell for less than fifteen thousand pounds, you'll be crazy!" Alan burst out, but that seemed unimportant; the important and the peculiar thing, in view of what he knew, was the smile on M.M.M.'s face. It was almost radiant. He could hardly have looked more delighted if Gillian had promised to marry him.

Rollison turned and went back the way he had come.

He was five minutes getting to the farmhouse, and had been there for five minutes when he heard the knock at the front door. He shuffled to the window and looked out as best he could; Gillian seemed to be alone. She was hatless in a linen dress with three-quarter length sleeves, and the dress was as green as the leaves of a tree in spring. He couldn't see her well, but there was youth and beauty in her, and he already knew of her great compassion.

He knew what had happened between her and the Texan, too; whichever way this went, she would get hurt.

He unfastened the chain.

"Who is it?"

"I'm sorry to worry you again, Mr. Smith," she said, in a more confident voice than she had used before, "but I've another suggestion to make, and I think you might like it. May I come in?"

Rollison opened the door wider, standing to one side. She stepped forward, and then realised that it wasn't Smith. She stopped, but his hand fell on to her wrist and he drew her in swiftly, closed the door, and then let her go. Fright and surprise put colour to her cheeks and brightness into her eyes, in spite of the dullness of the room.

Then she recognised Rollison.

"What on earth are you doing here? Why are you wearing Smith's clothes?" She was breathless and bewildered.

"I thought I'd keep them aired for him," said Rollison lightly, and gripped her arm again and smiled, as reassuring a smile as a man could give. "Don't get worked up, Gillian, we've things to talk about."

"But when did you get here? Was it you I talked to earlier this morning?"

"Yes."

"Then where *is* Smith? I've got to see him, I've got to talk to him!"

"You just have to take it easily for a few hours," Rollison soothed, "and you've got to get used to some unpleasant facts. Remember the tall Texan man, William Brandt?"

She looked at him warily.

"Of course I do."

"Have you seen the newspapers?"

"No."

"He is wanted for the two murders. He is also wanted for murder and other crimes in the United States. He is what we call a very bad man, Gillian."

Her eyes began to storm.

"I don't believe you."

"There's just one slim chance that I'm wrong and the police are also wrong," said Rollison. "If I'm right, then Tex fooled me completely. I've never met a man who seemed so sane and soundly honest. I'll ask Jolly to try to get a photograph of Tex Brandt radioed from the United States, so that we can be sure," Rollison went on. "Meanwhile, we may have misjudged someone else. Did you know that every move you've made, for weeks, has been watched and reported to this William Brandt and those who work for him? In short, that you've been spied on."

"That's impossible," Gillian declared. "Alan and I have been living down at the cottage most of the time. We've had hardly any visitors, except Monty."

"That's right," said Rollison.

"What on earth are you saying now?"

"That you've been spied on and your movements reported, that Alan's been watched, threatened by letter and telephone, both at the cottage and in London. Isn't that true?"

Gillian would never know just how beautiful she looked in this half-light; or how young and unsure of herself.

"Yes, everywhere he's been he's received threats, he told me so this morning but—" she hesitated, while he stood waiting for the obvious to

dawn on her. She went on abruptly: “If you’re suggesting Monty, it’s ludicrous.”

“Who else could it be?”

“It couldn’t be Monty! Why he’s my closest friend, Alan’s too. He—”

“He’s been desperately in love with you, and you’ve kept saying no,” Rollison reminded her, “and thwarted love can do queer things to human beings.”

“I simply cannot believe it,” Gillian insisted, and her honesty and her loyalty glowed. “You *must* be wrong.” Then she changed the subject, and swung into the attack. “It’s all very well standing there in Smith’s clothes and throwing these accusations about, but what about you yourself ? What do you think you’re doing? Where *is* Smith?”

“He’s resting.”

“I’m in no mood for joking!”

“Gillian,” said Rollison, very quietly, “I’ve never been less like joking, either. Come with me.” He took her arm, and she went with him without protesting, but freed her arm as soon as they were in the kitchen. At first she didn’t see the heap of dirt and the hole in the corner, and when he moved, to let her see it, she exclaimed: “What is that?”

“A safe containing the secret of Selby Farm, I fancy. The explanation of all the threats and violence. Now we know that, we can make a move forward. Will Brandt will probably be coming here within the next hour or so. We must have Monty here when he arrives. We can accuse them of working together and we can show them the safe. We should get a good idea of who is guilty and who isn’t, shouldn’t we?”

She didn’t answer at once.

Rollison left it to her.

“I suppose we would,” she said at last. “And at least it would be over, and we’d know the best and the worst.”

“I’ll go and get Monty,” Rollison said, “and your brother – if he wants to come.”

22

THE COMING OF WILL BRANDT

"I don't know what the devil you're playing at," M.M.M. said. "I thought you'd have the sense to keep off the case now, Rollison."

"You certainly made it clear that you wished I hadn't been invited," Rollison said mildly. "What changed your mind so much?"

"The crazy way you behaved."

"There was something else."

"I tell you I got fed up with you, and decided you were more dangerous than helpful to Gillian," M.M.M. insisted. He was in the main room of the cottage, and the smell of the stew was much stronger now, making Rollison feel positively hungry. "Now you say she's at the farmhouse, and Smith isn't."

"That's right."

"Why should *I* come, just because you want me to?"

"You don't have to come because I want you to," said Rollison, "you have to come because I'm going to make you." He beamed. "You could spare a thought to the fact that Gillian might be in acute danger, and you—"

"I'd do anything in the world to help Gillian," growled M.M.M., "but I'm not sure that coming with you will help her. Just because Alan's gone into the village, that's no reason to think you can force me to do anything, either."

"Monty," murmured Rollison, "you're going to walk across to the farmhouse, and go in at the front door. That's the easy way. Or you can come the way I did, which will be uncomfortable to say the least."

"I'm damned if I will!"

"Because I want you to be present when the Texan comes to see Gillian again."

M.M.M. exclaimed: "The man Brandt?"

"Yes."

"But he's a killer! The police are after him. It's in all the newspapers."

"And he's likely to be here soon. The police will know when he arrives, and they'll close in soon afterwards, but we'll have time to find out just what he's up to, and what's been going on. You want to find out the secret of the farm, don't you?"

"I don't give a damn about the secret, provided I can get Gillian out of this spot," M.M.M. growled, and then gave in. "All right, I'll come. We'd better leave a note for Alan."

Rollison watched while M.M.M. scribbled a note and put it on a table near the door, where Alan Selby couldn't fail to see it. Then M.M.M. asked Rollison to hand him his jacket. Rollison felt something hard in the pocket, and slipped his hand inside.

M.M.M. carried a gun.

Rollison made no comment, and M.M.M. moved towards the back door, using a walking stick. It would take him longer to walk to the cottage than it would take Rollison to go by the copse and the tunnel.

Rollison let him go ahead, and then hurried up the stair and to the loft. He spotted the open rooflight, through which the policeman on the roof must have climbed: and there was a pair of steps immediately beneath the rooflight. Rollison went halfway up, and put his head through the opening. A man – Bishop himself – was staring downwards, and had obviously seen M.M.M.

"Had any luck in spotting the bad men?" asked Rollison, *sotto voce.*

Bishop was so startled he nearly slipped. He turned his head, with the binoculars hanging round his neck, his face red as much from the sun as from annoyance at being caught out.

"You've got a nerve!"

"Don't blame me, it was hereditary," said Rollison, and went on almost in the same breath: "Two things, quickly. I've dug up a safe and it's over in the kitchen of the farmhouse now. Lay on someone to force it, will you? And I'm expecting the notorious William Brandt at the farmhouse before long. Will you give me half an hour alone with him and the others?"

"Goddammit man, there's a warrant out for you!"

"I could save myself by pushing you off the roof," said Rollison, "but I'm going to risk being charged." He saw the small walkie-talkie radio set standing on a ledge close to the detective. "Check with Grice, and ask him if it isn't worth a smile. If you hold Brandt before he gets here and I've had a talk with him, let failure be on your own head."

He dropped out of sight.

For fear Bishop would be over-zealous, he lowered the rooflight and latched it from beneath, and moved the steps. By the time he had finished, Bishop was talking to someone on the radio. Rollison hurried downstairs, went out the back way, then to the trees and the tunnel. He reached the farmhouse as M.M.M. was being admitted by Gillian.

"Hallo, folks," greeted Rollison, making M.M.M. look round with a frown. "It shouldn't be long before the bait brings the bad men. Seen the safe, Monty?"

"I don't believe it exists."

"Come and look," invited Rollison, and took them both in to the kitchen. M.M.M. stood and stared, and looked as if he didn't really believe what he saw. If that was an act, he did it very well indeed.

He swung round on Rollison.

"Now what makes you think that Brandt will come here?"

"I invited him."

"You're the biggest bighead I've ever met in my life! You think you've only to snap your fingers, and people come running. Why, you're crazy. He'll never come here, and you know it."

"I told him I'd unearthed the deadly secret," declared Rollison in

overtones of drama. “If anything will make him take a chance, that’s it.”

M.M.M. found nothing to say in reply, but poked at the safe with his walking stick.

“I’d like to know what’s worth two lives and all this fuss,” he said. “And I’ve been thinking. I’m not a bit sure that it’s any use waiting for this murderer, Brandt.” He shot an almost vindictive glance at Gillian. “He’s a smooth-tongued devil and will probably try to persuade us that black’s white. I think we ought to get out, and let the police wait here for him.”

“I think we ought to hear what he has to say,” said Gillian.

“Oh, no doubt you’ll get your way,” growled M.M.M. “I wish to God I’d never had anything to do with this. I wish I’d never fallen in love with you, too.” In that moment, he sounded almost as if he hated Gillian.

Rollison bumped against M.M.M. a moment later, taking the gun out of his pocket. It was a moment’s work to empty it.

They heard a motorcycle outside, its engine roaring. M.M.M. turned with surprising agility towards the window, and hobbled towards it and wrenched the curtain aside. Gillian followed him. Rollison slipped the empty gun back into the other man’s pocket, then watched from the side of the window, and saw the motorcyclist coming towards the farm, slowing down. He stopped at the gate, jumped off, and propped the machine up against the hedge. He was very tall, and his uniform suited him.

“Well, it looks as if I’m going to get my way for a change,” said M.M.M. “But why have the police sent a copper on a motorbike?”

“I wonder where Tex the Texan got that police constable’s uniform,” Rollison murmured.

Gillian exclaimed: “It *is* Tex!”

Rollison was behind them, and saw the light which leaped into Gillian’s eyes, and noticed the glint in M.M.M.’s. Of hatred ? He saw the one-legged man drop his right hand into his pocket, and keep it there. He moved forward towards the door, glancing sideways at the bulge in M.M.M.’s pocket. He felt sure that the man was holding the gun out of sight.

How did that square?

Rollison opened the door. Tex Brandt stood there, with his crash helmet making him look very tall indeed, a striking figure in the policeman’s blue. He smiled warmly at Rollison as he came in, and then saw Gillian. He was about to take off his helmet, but he stopped with his hand at his forehead, just to stare at her. He did not know that M.M.M. was in the room, just behind him.

“My, my, *my*,” he breathed. “I remembered you as beautiful, but I’d forgotten just how beautiful beauty could be. Did anyone ever tell you that you’re the most beautiful woman in the world?”

Gillian said: “Don’t fool, Tex.”

“I’m not fooling,” he assured her. “I mean every word I say.”

He went forward.

It looked as if he would take her in his great arms.

“Don’t you touch her,” growled M.M.M., and he drew his hand from his

pocket. His automatic pistol covered the American. “Take your murdering hands away from her. If you so much as lay a finger on her, I’ll shoot you.”

Gillian exclaimed: “Monty, put that gun away!”

The Texan turned round, very slowly.

Hatred was undoubtedly the word for the look in M.M.M.’s eyes, but there was something else, for which Rollison had been looking. He found it, but as a negative. These two men did not know each other, or their reaction would have been entirely different.

“What’s all this?” Tex asked, in a calm voice. “Who’s calling me a murderer?”

“Your record is all over the newspapers. The police know you killed two men and they won’t care whether they get you alive or dead,” said M.M.M. and that viciousness was still in his voice. “Get away from her.”

“I think you must be mad, Monty.” Gillian’s voice could not have been colder. “Please put that gun away, and stop play-acting.”

“*Play-acting!* I’ll show you who’s play-acting!” The maimed man’s eye glinted, he raised the gun a fraction, and there seemed nothing but death for the tall Texan.

“*Monty!*” screamed Gillian, and flung herself forward.

There was a little click; no sharp report, no flame, no bullet. The girl would have fallen had Tex not grabbed her, while Monty stood looking foolish, with the gun in his hand.

“I took the bullets out when you were poking at the safe,” explained Rollison mildly. “I wanted to make sure you didn’t do anyone any harm.”

M.M.M. didn’t speak, but all the colour drained away from his cheeks. He looked round, as if for somewhere to sit; as if he was afraid that he couldn’t stand up any longer. Then he moved to the wall and leaned against it, looked towards Gillian, and said: “You’d even protect him with your life. Why is it? Why can’t you feel for me like you do for him?”

The Texan was holding Gillian lightly, an arm round her shoulders.

“I just don’t know,” Gillian said, in a husky voice. “I just don’t know.” She looked up, twisting her head round so that she could see the tall man, and it seemed to Rollison that there was genuine bewilderment in her voice. “I felt exactly the same the moment I set eyes on him, although I know it doesn’t make sense.”

“It makes sense, honey,” said Tex Brandt. “It makes the kind of sense that leads to a marriage licence. Some folk wouldn’t believe it, but I felt just that way about you. I’ve been running from the police and looking for the biggest load of trouble I’ve ever known – and you were in my hair all the time, I couldn’t get you out.”

He held her more tightly.

“But he’s a killer! He’s got a reputation for killing!” M.M.M. looked and sounded desperate. “You can’t feel like that about a *murderer*.”

“Maybe I’m not the murderer,” the Texan said. “Maybe you know who they really are, Morne.”

“Hold it,” said Rollison. “Monty, how well do you know the man

Littleton?"

"Little *what?'* asked M.M.M., as if blankly.

"A man named Littleton."

"I don't know anyone named Littleton," denied M.M.M. in the same taut, hopeless voice.

"You've been acting oddly since I came into this job," Rollison said. "You've been with the Selbys nearly all the time in recent weeks, you could have been the man watching them, reporting what they were doing, keeping Littleton and his employer informed all the time."

M.M.M. said in a husky voice: "Are you crazy? I didn't kill anybody, and as for spying on Gillian and Alan – no, I haven't spied on anyone. I don't know what you're playing at, but if you think I'm a crook, you're wrong."

"Someone's been getting at Alan," Gillian said, and turned to Rollison. "But I told you I couldn't believe that it was Monty. I just couldn't believe it of him."

"Do we have to talk about it any further?" asked Tex Brandt, and he flashed a grin at Rollison; it could not have been more friendly or more likeable. "The first thing is to find out where the cache is. We can talk when we've found it."

"He's found it already," M.M.M. declared, and Rollison saw the tension spring into Tex Brandt's eyes. "Why don't you make a deal? Why don't you buy Rollison off? He's buyable."

"Monty," murmured Rollison, "I don't think anyone could buy anybody off with the contents of that safe. I don't know for certain what is in it, but I don't think anyone would fight the way they have done for jewels. I don't think they would commit murder so recklessly. I don't think the police would allow Tex Brandt to get through the cordon thrown round this farm if they really thought he was a bad man. What's in the safe, Tex?"

Tex was grinning more broadly than ever.

"Well, I guess I'll have to get up earlier to fool you," he said. "You're dead right, Mr. Rollison. That safe contains an atomic radiation unit which was stolen from research laboratories in New York a year ago. It's a new kind of unit, much smaller than any in use yet. It's in a special kind of radiation-proof container which weighs pretty heavy but isn't made of lead. In that safe it's harmless, but out of that safe it would kill anyone if they were exposed to it for long. It operates like a death ray. Sure, it's that bad," he added, when M.M.M. gasped and Gillian gripped his arm very tightly. "Does anyone object if I go and have a look and make sure it's the right one?"

"Yes, I object," Rollison declared. "Tex, you forgot to tell me about the jewels you handled for Freddie Littleton and others in the U.S.A."

"You're thinking of someone else," said the Texan slowly. "There's a man from Texas, a real bad man, who once called himself William Brandt. He posed as me in New York, and it suited me to let him get away with it."

"Maybe," Rollison said, hopefully, and then added to M.M.M.: "Keep our American friend covered with this gun, will you?" He took his own small automatic from his pocket, and handed it to the crippled man. "I won't be

five minutes. Gillian, don't make Monty get careless with the gun; this time it's loaded."

M.M.M. looked savagely delighted.

The Texan smiled, as if he hadn't a fear in the world.

Rollison ran up the stairs and into Littleton's room, slicing the cords from the man's ankles, helped him off the bed and then unsteadily down the stairs. Littleton kept gasping as the blood began to circulate again, but he reached the doorway of the downstairs room inside the five minutes that Rollison had stipulated.

"Which of these is your boss?" Rollison asked, still supporting his prisoner.

Littleton took one glance.

"You kidding?" he demanded. "Neither of them. Brandt is a fat guy. I don't know the tall guy, and I've seen Morne around, that's all."

The response was too spontaneous for anyone to doubt its truth. This Tex Brandt was not the man the police were after: was not Littleton's employer. He had not killed Lodwin or Charlie.

The killer was a certain fat American . . .

M.M.M. looked almost regretful.

"Try walking about," Rollison said to Littleton, "you'll be all right in a minute." He turned to Brandt. "Hi, Tex! You're okay, apparently. I did wonder about you and tried to get a picture of the real Brandt, but it didn't arrive in time. It'll come soon. Monty, he's the wrong man to shoot, but we still need the right one."

Gillian was looking intently into the tall American's eyes.

M.M.M. turned away, as if he couldn't bear the thought of them together. Littleton began to hobble of his own accord.

"You want to know something?" the Texan asked Rollison: "I knew I wasn't such a bad guy. Mr. Rollison, I know the other William Brandt only too well. I'm in England to hunt for him. I took an interest in this farm because of him. I do have a principal in New York, but he's not a private individual."

"Let me guess that he's also represented in Washington," said Rollison mildly. "F.B.I."

"That's right."

"All right, I agree that you had to fool me," said Rollison, forgivingly. "Put me out of my misery in another way, too. The police know what you are really doing, don't they?"

"I had them informed, today." Tex said. "They've been mighty kind, since they recovered from the shock."

"Don't ever say the British aren't co-operative," Rollison said.

"I don't know anyone who could co-operate more," declared Tex. "Will you make a real job of it, and let me look at that safe now?"

"Just follow me," said Rollison.

He turned towards the kitchen, the hole, and the safe. The tall Texan followed him, and Gillian was just behind. Littleton kept hobbling, much

easier now, and M.M.M. stared bleakly out of the window.

There was everything as Rollison had left it, with two exceptions.

The back door was open.

The safe was open, too.

23

CAUSE FOR DREAD

Rollison heard the sound of approaching men as he stared at the empty hole. Several detectives were near, and in the distance there was the hum of several car engines. He felt the Texan's hand heavy on his shoulder, and Brandt said in a taut voice: "Where is it, Rollison?"

Rollison said: "When we were here before you arrived, the safe was locked." He saw shadows at the doorway, and knew that the police had arrived in strength; there would be others at the front, the house would be surrounded. "How bad is it?"

"If anyone keeps the container taken from that safe for twenty minutes without putting it inside a protective box, it will kill everyone within fifty yards of it," declared the Texan. "I wasn't fooling you about that. It's death in a box."

Bishop came in, looking more massive than ever. He didn't smile as he looked at Rollison and then at Tex.

"You've had all the time I'm going to give you," he said to Rollison, and looked at the Texan. "Are you William Thomas Brandt?"

"Bishop," Rollison interrupted, "I don't know how much you've been told, but a small container has been taken out of this safe, and this man says that it contains a radiation unit which would be deadly to anyone exposed to it. Have you stopped everyone who's left the farmhouse?" Rollison looked bleak and pale. Tex Brandt, a card in his hand, was like a figure of doom. Bishop looked from one to the other, and said sharply: "Don't try to scare me."

"Anyone exposed to that radiation unit for long will die," Tex said. "I'm not scaring anyone. I'm terrified of what will happen if we don't find it and put it back in that safe."

Bishop said heavily: "No one has left the farmhouse in the past half hour. We've allowed everyone to come in, none to go out."

There was silence which lasted for a long time. Then suddenly Freddie Littleton broke in, bursting into a nervous cackle of a laugh.

"So the Boss has beaten you," he said, and his voice nearly crackled. "He's got away with it under your noses! Cops? I've trodden on cleverer things than you!"

The Texan's hand gripped Rollison with frightening force.

"We've got to get that container back," he said. "If it's in this house, none of us will live for another week."

Swift, frightening thoughts flashed into Rollison's mind. Someone had got into the farmhouse by the apple store- cupboard, had crept across, opened the safe and taken the unit out – but he hadn't gone out by the back or the

front door; they had been too closely watched.

There was only one way he could have gone.

He spoke in a clipped voice: “Bishop, this is a job for one man. I started it. I have to finish it. There’s a tunnel leading from the house to that copse of trees. If you’ll watch the entrance in that storeroom, I’ll go and seal off the other end.”

“You won’t,” Bishop said, tautly. “You’ll tell us where the other end is.”

“There’s no need to risk your men.”

“You can come, but you’re not going alone.” Bishop snapped orders to several men who were now inside the farmhouse. They went to the tunnel door. Rollison, Bishop, Tex and three plain-clothes men ran towards the copse. The speed with which the police surrounded the trees was startling. Bishop and Tex kept close to Rollison, and he led them straight to the far end of the tunnel.

The cover was pushed to one side.

The tunnel was empty, except for police who came hurrying through it.

“He can’t have got away,” Bishop said.

“He got away,” the Texan stated flatly. “Inspector, you have to send out an alarm warning. Everyone, policemen and every newspaper wants to know about this. If that unit was taken on a train or a bus, or on an aircraft, it would kill everyone aboard.”

“Tex, who is the American really after the unit?” Rollison demanded.

“Abner Crane, if that helps you.”

“What is he like?”

“Good and fat. A big guy, around fifty years old, with watery blue eyes and grey hair, with a bald patch.”

“If he was here in person, he can’t have got far. Would he know how deadly that unit is?”

“No.”

“Bishop, if you’ll have that description put out, and a cordon flung round the whole area . . .”

“I’ll fix it by radio,” Bishop said tautly.

“There’s another way we might find this Abner Crane,” Rollison went on. “A lot of things are adding up. Come on, Tex.”

“If you try to leave the farmhouse, I’ll clap handcuffs on you,” Bishop flashed.

“I won’t leave without permission.” Rollison was already near the back door, which was open, and heard voices. The others were in the big front room, and Alan Selby was with them, saying: “But if it’s been taken away, there’s nothing else to worry about is there?” His voice was shrill with excitement. “We may not get so much money for the farmhouse, but at least there’s no danger. We ought to be shouting for joy, Gillian, not looking scared out of our wits. And you, too, Monty, it’s all over, we’ve got nothing else to worry about.”

“I’ve got plenty to worry about,” said M.M.M.

“Oh, forget it! There are plenty more attractive girls about. Aren’t there, sis?” Selby sounded positively buoyant as he spoke to his sister. “My God, this is the biggest day of my life. For weeks, for months, I’ve been scared out of my wits. It didn’t matter where I went or what I did, someone always knew about it. I didn’t tell you everything, Gillian,” he went on, as Rollison drew nearer. “I tried not to worry you, but it was dreadful. And it’s *over!* I could dance a jig.”

Rollison stepped inside. Alan Selby was actually fooling at a little dance, his eyes bright with excitement; he seemed oblivious of M.M.M.’s scowl, of Gillian’s pale face, and of Brandt’s bleakness. The only one who seemed interested and amused was Littleton who stood clapping to a kind of rhythm. Just outside the door was one of Bishop’s men, and in the grounds two dozen police were searching, and others were coming up by car and Black Maria.

“That makes it quite an occasion,” Rollison said coldly. “Did anyone tell you what was in the container ?”

“What the hell does it matter what’s in it? It’s out of the farmhouse, and we can breathe freely again.”

“You never made a bigger mistake.”

“Now what’s on your mind?” Selby demanded. “So tired of failure that you have to be smart?”

“Not so smart as I’d like to be,” said Rollison, “but facts are facts. Someone knew exactly where you were all the time, and was able to spy on you and your sister. Someone worked with the false William Brandt, whose real name is Abner Crane. Someone did a deal with him to get that container. The same someone had to get into the farm, and move Old Smith out of it. Searching for the unit might have taken hours, days or weeks, so the eagerness to buy is easy to understand, but some things made no sense. Two men were killed in cold blood, but Smith, who stood in the way of Gillian selling the farm, wasn’t harmed. So there was someone working with Abner Crane who didn’t want Old Smith dead. Obviously sentiment wasn’t the reason, as the two men had been murdered – and Morne attacked with intent to kill. Why should such killers leave Old Smith unharmed and in possession?”

Selby had gone very pale.

“Who would kill an old man?” he demanded.

“Abner Crane and the people he used would kill anyone if it paid off,” said Rollison, “but someone wanted Smith alive. We now know that the someone knew where the tunnel was, and was able to get in and out of the farmhouse, after that radiation unit. Who would be in a better position to know about the tunnel than *you,* Selby?”

“You’re crazy!” Selby cried.

“You know where Crane’s gone, Selby, and where that deadly unit is. Better tell us, quick.”

Gillian was staring at her half-brother, and her eyes were touched with horror. M.M.M. looked very near despair.

"Where is Crane?" Rollison demanded roughly.

"I've never heard of Crane!"

"You know of Crane all right. I'll stake a fortune that he first came to you about the farm. You agreed to help, then put Old Smith up to refusing to get out, so as to push the price up. You played the double game until suddenly everything became urgent, because Tex Brandt of the F.B.I. was on Crane's heels.

"Crane had used Brandt's name as an alias before; now he used it again, and stepped up pressure. He knew that he was being double-crossed, but blamed Lodwin and Charlie Habden; and was afraid that if they were caught they'd implicate him. So he killed them both."

Selby was ashen pale, and his eyes were feverishly bright.

Bishop came in.

"We haven't found the unit," he announced roughly, "but I've had confirmation from London that it's deadly."

"And Selby is as deadly," Rollison said. "He thinks there's still a fortune for him if he keeps quiet, and will risk thousands of lives to get it."

"It's a damnable lie!" Selby screeched.

Rollison swung round on M.M.M.

"How about *your* conscience? Two people tried to murder you, remember. Your whole attitude's changed, too. Why was it? For God's sake don't hold out any longer."

M.M.M. said gruffly, painfully.

"I tried not to hurt Gillian, but you're right now. After you'd left the Wheatsheaf yesterday, the barmaid told me that she'd heard Alan talking to an American – a big, fat man. Then I realised that Alan was involved, but . . ."

M.M.M. broke off.

"The Wheatsheaf," Rollison interrupted. "Could Abner Crane be hiding there?"

24

CAUSE OF DEATH

The inn looked picturesque and charming against the background of meadows and wooded land, and the beautifully painted inn sign, of stacked corn, swayed in a gentle wind. A large modern car stood in the courtyard, but there was no sign of life, no movement, only a stillness as of death.

Rollison drove up to the front door.

Out of sight, but watching him, were the police, and Tex Brandt. Bishop had allowed him to come on his own only because it seemed more likely that, alone, he would be admitted. Directly the front door was open, the police would come rushing. The back door was being watched too; there was a cordon round the Wheatsheaf and, beyond, a wider cordon round the village and the farm.

Rollison pressed the bell.

There was no sound.

He pressed again, knowing that if the delay lasted long, then Bishop and his men would come running, determined to force their way in.

Rollison heard footsteps, and Mildred the barmaid opened the door. She looked flushed as from sleep, her fair hair was tousled, and she seemed vexed.

"Don't you know we're closed until half-past five?"

"Sorry, but this is urgent," answered Rollison, and actually managed to smile. "Mildred—"

The woman's expression cleared, and she interrupted brightly:

"It's Mr. Rollison, isn't it?"

"Yes. Mildred, you told Mr. Morne about an American who talked to Mr. Selby."

"That's right."

"Is the American here?"

"He came in about ten minutes ago, sneaked in the back way, and went up to his room. Why . . ."

She broke off, frowning, seeing policemen appear, and obviously realised that the inn was surrounded.

"Is your husband here?" Rollison demanded.

"No. I'm on my own. Bert's gone into town, with the barman."

"No servants here?"

"No. What on earth . . ."

"You wait out in the garden," Rollison said. "It's vital." She would never know how much she had been exposed to death. "Which room is this man in?"

"Number 3, at the head of the stairs."

"Thanks," Rollison said.

He went in.

The inn was absolutely silent except for the faint sounds of his own movements. He reached a narrow flight of stairs, and crept up them. The police filed into the passage, and he heard the muted sounds they made.

He reached the door of the room numbered 3, listened for a moment, but heard nothing.

He rapped sharply on the door.

There was no response.

He called: "Crane, I've got news for you. You're handling a deadly radioactive unit that will kill you if you keep close to it any longer. Open the door, and get rid of it."

There was still no response.

Every moment held its own danger. If the unit were in this inn, then already its deadly rays had penetrated walls and ceiling, the air Rollison breathed and the air about him was active with an unseen killer.

"Crane, you heard me."

Then there was a movement; a squeak of sound. Rollison felt sure that a window was being opened. He stood aside as Bishop arrived, a great axe in his hands.

Bishop smashed a blow at the door, wrenched the axe out, and smashed again. A wooden panel split. Through the gap, Rollison saw a fattish man by the window, standing there and holding a small metal container in his hand.

He was fat and big: exactly as Tex Brandt had described Abner Crane.

The axe crashed again.

"If you don't let me go I'll throw this down and break it," Crane said, in a strangely quiet, southern voice. "And if it breaks, no one in this village will live the week out."

"Including Abner Crane," Rollison said.

"I don't have a thing to live for, without this," retorted Crane, and he rolled the unit on the palm of his hand. "Are you going to do a deal?"

Rollison said, as if half-persuaded: "I'll talk to the police."

"You'd better be quick."

Rollison moved back a foot. Bishop was holding the axe as if he would hurl it through the door and into the American's face. Abner Crane was staring at them both.

Then, Tex Brandt's face appeared at the open window. He was a yard away from Crane, who still held the unit loosely on his palm. Tex was standing on a ladder or a window sill. All the time, those unseen radiations were coming from the unit; and if it were broken then so much unseen power would be released that no one here would live.

Tex stretched out his arm, the fingers of the hand crooked. He was within a foot of the man in the room.

Rollison said: "Bishop, we've got to let Crane through, or he'll kill hundreds of people."

"It's impossible!" Bishop rasped, and playing his part with absolute conviction. "Crane, if you don't . . ."

Tex grabbed.

For a dreadful moment Rollison thought the unit would fall, but instead Tex held it, and backed from the window, while Rollison and Bishop rushed the smashed door, and caught a struggling, kicking, *dying* man.

In another room here, without Mildred's knowledge, were the man and woman who had attacked Morne. They made no attempt to escape, and even seemed eager to make a statement. The statement told how right Rollison had been; how treacherous Alan Selby was; how Crane had murdered both Lodwin and Charlie Habden, believing they, not Selby, were double-crossing him.

In Crane's room was a small outer container for the unit, in his car, a stronger one still. Had he been able to escape at once, he might have been safe from the radiation, but he had been exposed to it for so long that within two days he was dead.

No one else was seriously affected.

It was Old Smith who told the final story: a scared old man, who had believed that the safe contained stolen jewels, and had allowed it to be buried in the farmhouse by the original thief, the partner of Abner Crane.

The partner's name was Lodwin.

Jolly appeared, as if by magic, wraithlike from the kitchen. A moment later, he opened the big room door and announced: "Mr. Tex Brandt, sir!"

Rollison jumped up.

"Hi, Tex!" he greeted, and shook hands warmly; he looked behind the tall man and saw no one else, and went on: "How's Gillian?"

"She'll be okay when the trial's over," said Tex. "I've just come away from your Scotland Yard. Those cops really know what they want, don't they? At least they don't want Alan for murder, they don't think they could make it stick. He swears that he didn't know that Crane killed anyone, and planned to have Morne killed. Easy to blame the dead, but I should say it's true. Crane has a reputation for killing off anyone who's served his purpose, and Selby would have gone, too."

"I almost wish he had," said Rollison, and was silent for a moment. Then he turned to the cocktail cabinet. "What will you have?"

"Bourbon on the rocks, the way Jolly pours it," said Tex, and stared at the Trophy Wall. "Gee, that's still my favourite. I've been to St. Paul's, the National Gallery, the Houses of Parliament, the Tower of London, Scotland Yard and Madame Tussauds, but I still prefer this wall. Ah, thanks!" He took his drink. "That's wonderful." He sipped again. "I brought you a little souvenir. Do you think you could find room for it on the wall?"

"What do you think, Jolly?" asked Rollison.

Jolly turned in the doorway.

"I'm sure we could, sir, provided it isn't too large."

"It's quite small," the tall Texan assured him. "It's a model in gold of an

electric chair. If they'd caught up with William Brandt in his home state he would have fried. You've got a hangman's rope, you've got a miniature guillotine, you have nearly every lethal weapon under the sun, but nothing that looks like an electric chair."

"I'm sure that would be most appropriate, sir," said Jolly politely, and disappeared.

The Texan grinned at Rollison.

"Thanks," he said. "For everything."

"A pleasure," murmured Rollison. "Has Gillian heard from Monty Morne?"

"You bet she has. He's going to be at our wedding," Tex Brandt added. "He's quite a guy, that M.M.M. Do you know what he's going to do when I take Gillian away?"

"No," said Rollison and looked at him curiously.

"He's going to rent Selby Farm from her, and farm it, because Old Smithy is going to be charged with being in possession of stolen property, so his next home will be prison. How about M.M.M. as a farmer, Toff? Do you approve?"

Rollison grinned, and said resoundingly: "You bet!"

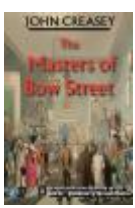
Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street
This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*
2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*

3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. The Baron and the Beggar *(1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

'Department Z' Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. The Death Miser *(1932)*
2. Redhead *(1934)*
3. First Came a Murder *(1934)*
4. Death Round the Corner *(1935)*
5. The Mark of the Crescent *(1935)*
6. Thunder in Europe *(1936)*
7. The Terror Trap *(1936)*
8. Carriers of Death *(1937)*
9. Days of Danger *(1937)*
10. Death Stands By *(1938)*
11. Menace! *(1938)*
12. Murder Must Wait *(1939)*
13. Panic! *(1939)*
14. Death by Night *(1940)*
15. The Island of Peril *(1940)*
16. Sabotage *(1941)*
17. Go Away Death *(1941)*
18. The Day of Disaster *(1942)*
19. Prepare for Action *(1942)*
20. No Darker Crime *(1943)*
21. Dark Peril *(1944)*
22. The Peril Ahead *(1946)*
23. The League of Dark Men *(1947)*
24. The Department of Death *(1949)*
25. The Enemy Within *(1950)*
26. Dead or Alive *(1951)*
27. A Kind of Prisoner *(1954)*
28. The Black Spiders *(1957)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*

6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*

8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*

22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

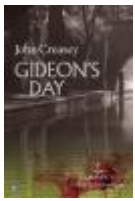
'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It's the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*

17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Select Synopses

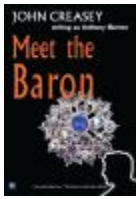


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

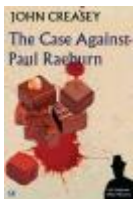


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

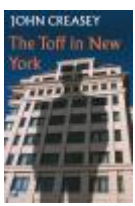
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

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